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Bestseller Mystery
MAGAZINE

Wings of DEATH

by BRANDON BIRD

A strange disappearance, a frightened girl, and murder in the mountains.....

The Intruders — EVAN HUNTER

Never Look Back — AVRAM DAVIDSON and CHESTER COHEN

Account Settled — ROBERT ZACKS

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March, 1959

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Grat went to mountain country to see hawks and rest his nerves. It turned out to be the wrong place to have gone—what with killer birds, a frightened girl, and the disappearance of an important man. And then murder came looking for him....

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Bestseller Mystery Magazine, March, 1959, Vol. 1, No. 5, Whole No. 214, Published bi-monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $2.00 in U.S.A. and possessions and Canada; $2.25 in the Pan American Union; $2.50 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H.

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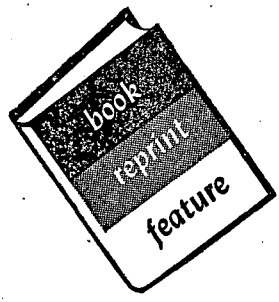
Grat was glad to get the hawk watch assignment —as a photographer for a big picture magazine, he'd seen more than enough of civilized men preying on one another, and he looked forward to the mountains, and to seeing murder given back to nature where it belonged.... He met a girl when he got there, and it shook him when he saw fear in her lovely eyes. And then he learned that murder was not confined to nature even in the mountains, and the time came when he feared for his own life as he had never feared before.



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WINGS OF DEATH

by **BRANDON BIRD**

CHAPTER ONE

THEY SAY A HAWK WATCH is where a man switches places with the hawk. It sounds innocent enough the first time you hear it—the way it sounded to me when my editors gave me this assignment.

"Do you good, Grat, to photograph hawks and eagles for a change. Get your mind off people."

All that was in a big mulberry and mustard-yellow room high above Rockefeller Plaza. I can still see the picture editor watching me from where he sat on the corner of his desk beneath the photographic murals. I liked the idea. For one thing, hawks have always had a sinister attraction

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for me. I guess I was a little sour on the human animal. Months of doing picture stories of civilized men preying on each other, in large groups or as polished individuals, gets to you. Giving murder back to nature where it belongs seemed like a nice thought. So . . .

. . . here I was, in a glassed-in box called a fire tower, jutting forty or fifty feet above the backbone of the mountain just to put us a little closer to the sun. They had said it was one of the best places for the hawk migration. Since I'm not one of these birdy people, I wouldn't know, but the lack of human beings and their nasty little ways, for the present at least, was refreshing.

Once every hour or two since noon a small breeze had found its way through the opened glass panels of the tower. Not enough to use for air, just the Indian Summer smell floating up, dusty-dry and tea-like. It wouldn't have been so bad if all day long there hadn't been this feeling of waiting. My Leica was ready on its tripod where I could cover anything coming at us from the north but, for some reason, we were seeing hardly any hawks. Red said it was the lack of wind. From what I'd got to know about Red since morning, I could say it wasn't rash conjecture.

Being shut up in here with another person wasn't my own idea but I couldn't have got here without him. He seemed all right, a quiet, big-boned six-foot angular guy about four years younger than I am—not over twenty-five—with crew-cut, red-orange hair. It grew all over him—at the open neck of his plaid wool shirt, on his wrists and on his shanks where his khaki pants never quite met the tops of his short Bass field boots. The slightly undershot jaw, straight nose and sensitive mouth gave him an almost classic profile but most of the time he had an expression of sunny, wide-open wonder and intense interest in what you were saying.

I don't know what his wife Ruth was like—she must have been wonderful if he was being as accurate as in his other comments—but no female of any species could have matched him more than the half-grown, orange belton setter puppy he was holding on his lap. Charm was predominantly white but it was the way her orange speckles matched Red's hair and the freckles on the back of his neck and hands and any on his face that didn't get lost in the high wind-blown color that made them perfect. While he mauled her ear with one big hand, Charm leaned her head against his knuckles and sighed blissfully, watching me with dark, liquid eyes.

I reached for my binoculars

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lying on the topographic map mounted on the table.

The mountains arounds us were cruelly impersonal with a big sky throwing anything human out of scale. To the west, Cacapon Mountain was mottled with sluggish purple cloud shadows, the valley on this side a broad spread of rolling pine lands with some hardwoods burning with intense October color. There were a very few patchwork fields, mostly the pines, and winding north, the forks of Sleepy Creek. Someone called it that and gave its name to the mountain we were on when all this was still Virginia. I don't suppose it has changed much since.

I focussed my binocs on the foreshortened contours of our ridge, wishing something would happen. Earlier today I had found a ledge or spine of rocks, knife-edge narrow, a mile or more to the north of us. I studied them again. It was a stratum that would ordinarily be lying flat. These were shoved up nearly on end. From what I could see they dropped off sheer on either side. There was something fascinating about their bleached and jagged look like the bony dorsal fin of the mountain—the way a skeleton of a huge animal arouses your morbid curiosity.

I heard Red clear his throat behind me.

"Yes?"

"It's nothing," he said. "I thought it was going to be a hawk but it's just a buzzard."

I could hear him strike a match. There was the mixed odor of the match and the smell of his cigarette. I heard Charm stir on his lap and whimper a little as she settled on her crippled hip. But through my glasses there was no sound, no movement in the sprawling vastness around us.

To the east, Third Hill stretched like Sleepy Creek Mountain, not quite north and south, forming a narrow canoe-shaped valley or trough between them. We were at the southern neck and at this point the foliage on Third Hill looked parched and close enough to touch through the coated lens. Beyond it in the blue haze to the east I could see Little North Mountain, the easternmost of the Alleghenies.

I swung my glasses back to the rocks up the ridge. Now, with a spot of sunlight on them, I got the odd impression part of them had moved. I brought the lens into sharper focus. There was something tan on one of the points. When it moved again I saw it was a man. His head seemed to be bare and in this light his hair looked white. If he was holding his hat I couldn't make it out.

"Spot something?" Red asked beside me.

"Just a man. On that narrow

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mass of rocks up to the north. He seems to be looking for something."

"Probably hawks," Red said.

"I hope he has better luck than we've had." For some reason, seeing him up here on my rocks was just a little irritating.

"If you've had enough—" Red closed his hawk count book and slipped it into the pocket of his plaid shirt—"we may as well call it a day."

"You think there's no chance of an eagle? I've come a long way."

"It's five-fifteen: With the wind right there's always a chance of an eagle till sunset, but we haven't even had a flight of hawks today. I'm getting numb." He rubbed his posterior anatomy. "Let's go down and get our stuff together. Then if nothing turns up I'll come back and lock the tower."

After all the trouble I'd caused him, I couldn't object.

To be certain I wouldn't miss anything, I dismounted the Leica and hung it around my neck. Red gathered Charm into his big arms and I followed them down the seven flights of steps.

Red had his big shoulders and head stuck into the Conservation Commission's jeep.

"Here's the rest of this lunch Ruth packed. I could use a little, couldn't you?"

It had been a long time since food. I said I could.

We stood by the dead ashes of our noon fire and ate the sandwiches, watching Charm bounce around the clearing at the base of the tower with her peculiar little limp, searching out scents among the weeds and flinty stones.

"How did she get that hip?" I asked.

"A crazy driver—when she was three months old." His red-brown eyes were hurt. "For a while we thought she wouldn't live. The vet advised putting her to sleep—you know how they are—but we—Well, you wouldn't want anyone doing that to you, would you?"

"She'll never be able to hunt?"

"No, but that doesn't matter. We're lucky to have her."

I watched a black shape wheeling out over the valley to the west. "What's that?" I pointed.

Red focussed his binoculars on it. "Turkey buzzard," he said. "Probably a local."

"You were telling me about this hawk migration." I let my glasses hang from my neck beside my Leica. "Fill me in a little more."

"Well, as I said this morning, they come down from Canada and New England, following the ridges of the Alleghenies. They get a free ride on rising air currents and thermals. Best conditions occur with a northwest wind creating a lift as it flows up over the ridges from the valleys—like

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over an airfoil. There are lulls in the migration—"

"I've noticed," I said.

"—mostly during low-pressure periods. The flights dam up and then, with fair weather and good winds, they come down in swarms." He took another bite from his sandwich and studied the hole. "Was this your idea—pictures of hawks and eagles in migration—or your editors'?"

"It's what we call a staple—one of those things that can be shot one year and published the next, or any year, and still be timely. I get the feeling that what happens along this mountain on this particular afternoon will be happening exactly the same on a day like this next October, and the next, and ten years or a hundred and ten from now. There may be a different buzzard out there prowling for different carrion killed by a different predator, but there will always be predators and prey, and scavengers to glut on what's left over."

"Do you work under definite orders from your magazine?" Red asked.

"I'm not one of their staff photographers, but I'm on roving assignments. I make sure the editors are interested in a story before I go chasing off to some obscure place after pictures. Unless something blows up under my nose, which happens once in a long time. This idea wasn't exactly my own but it sounded—" Red had me by the shoulder shaking the bones loose. I followed his other hand, pointing with the remains of his sandwich.

A big bird was moving in ellipses out in the little valley to the east of us, climbing higher with no apparent motion of its wings. I got it in my 12-powers with the blurred landscape slipping past and felt the hairs stir on the back of my neck. It was taking its time loafing along with a lovely floating action and I followed the wide counter-clockwise curves, up and up.

"It's a golden eagle all right," Red said. "See the color of that head and neck?"

It was as if a beam of golden light caught the head from above, leaving the face and throat in brown shadow. The glasses held it in an unreal vacuum accentuated by the absolute lack of sound that seems to press on your eardrums up here. As I watched, something about the attitude of the bird changed—like a spring placed under tension. The tail flared and the great body rolled, peeling off like a fighter plane leaving formation. In the first few seconds of the dive the enormous wings kept flapping, pumping in for the kill. Then they set, half-folded, and the speed was more than I could keep up with through the glasses. Without binocs, the eagle was a black dot boring for a spot some-

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where up the ridge from us and in a matter of seconds was blocked out of sight by the trees around our clearing. I ran for the fire tower, pounding up the steps with several hundred dollars worth of lens and precision metal work hanging around my neck and clanking together like dime store hardware.

I finally got there. In the tower I wheezed for breath and swept the ridge to the north trying for a movement of wings or some other sign of the big brown shape. I searched the valleys on both sides. Nothing.

I'd watched killers work before but not like this. Seeing it done this way, clean, unhesitating, without frustration, was almost beautiful. If you didn't think too much about the bird or squirrel or whatever had been on the receiving end of that dive.

"Can you see him, Grat?" Red's voice floated up from a far-off place.

"Not a feather."

"If he made a kill he'll probably take a while to feed on it," Red called up. "I doubt if you get another look at him."

"You don't think I'll get a chance at him as he passes?"

"Can't hear you," Red called.

"You don't think he'll come this way?"

"With the sun as low as it is, I think he'll go to a perch for the night," Red said. "Take your time, but when you come down, snap the lock after you."

I didn't answer him. Something was moving up among the sharp high rocks to the north. It was a little difficult to get it in my glasses—the eagle rising in a narrow spiral out of the rocks. Keeping my binoculars glued to it, I felt with my other hand for my Leica. If I got to use it at all, it would have to be without the tripod.

The bird had altitude as soon as it was above the rocks. Spreading the huge wings it set itself in a slanting glide, coasting like a bomber diagonally across the little valley to my right. Lower and lower it came until it reached a point on Third Hill almost opposite my tower. I got my camera on it and tracked it in, feeling it slow down just as I tripped the trigger. I saw it make a few backbeats with its wings and then I lost it. I could only hope I'd got it. If I had, the Telyt lens would have done the rest. I grabbed my 12-powers and began probing the upper slopes of Third Hill where the big hawk had disappeared.

The sun had dropped enough so that the purple shadow of Sleepy Creek Mountain had crept up on Third Hill, darkening it nearly to the top. I ran my binocs left and right, covering the area carefully as I went. Just above the shadowy part my glasses picked

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up something. I went back, the way you go back over a sentence to get a hidden meaning. It was a figure in breeches or jodhpurs and a jacket, standing in a small opening in the trees, looking through binoculars. I supposed whoever it was was looking for the eagle too. Then I realized I was wrong.

The binoculars showed as two circles, like oversized eyes without pupil or iris, peering directly into mine.

CHAPTER TWO

I KEPT MY glasses on the blank stare of the binoculars across the valley. They were still fixed on me. There was something unpleasant about the unblinking intensity of it. We stayed that way for half a minute, maybe longer. Without taking my glasses down I called to Red.

He unfolded himself from the jeep, crossed to the tower and I felt his steps vibrate up the metal framework. When I put my glasses back on the little clearing across the valley it was empty.

Red climbed through the trap door in the floor, not even breathing hard. "What's up?"

"Maybe it's nothing," I said, "but there was someone across the valley. In that little opening over on Third Hill."

Red uncased his binoculars and looked across.

"They're gone now," I said. "I can't say why, but there was something about it—"

"What?" Red frowned, trying to follow me.

"It wasn't like someone peeking into apartment windows or onto a beach the way some people do. This was different. They just stood there with their binocs on me as if they were trying to identify me, like a hawk."

"What did you do?" Red asked.

"Nothing. I just kept mine on them."

"Does it occur to you—" and Red grinned—"that you looked exactly the same to them?"

"I doubt if they could see me that well—up here in this tower."

"They could probably see you as well as you saw them, if their glasses were as strong. What did he look like?"

"Sort of thin—sports clothes."

"I mean, what kind of a guy did he seem to be? A native?"

"All I know is that it was a—" I stopped. "Well, I can't even say it was a man. I couldn't see the face for the binoculars. The clothes were the kind anyone could wear."

"I imagine it's been another hawk watcher," Red said. "I thought you'd spotted the eagle."

"I did. It came out of those rocks up our ridge and crossed the little valley. I tried for him just before he went out of sight."

"Was it carrying anything?"

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"I couldn't tell. I lost it against Third Hill over there, just before I saw this person."

"Maybe you'll get a chance at another one tomorrow," Red said. He was closing the glass panels of the tower.

"Who lives over on that mountain?" I said.

"I didn't know anyone did. But I'm not familiar with this section." He was standing aside to let me through the trap door.

On the way down I stopped at the first landing and looked north again while Red fastened the lock on the tower. Up where the eagle had made his dive, there was nothing but the bare rocks and empty sky. Not even a buzzard.

Jolting down the west slope of the mountain with Charm curled at our feet, neither of us had much to say.

I wondered why I was paying so much attention to the trees. It's a habit I've noticed I fall into when I have something in the back of my mind.

Red hadn't spoken and I supposed he was dreaming about his wife and dinner in one order or the other. Charm had her head against his foot on the brake pedal.

"What would make that eagle dive so far like that?" I asked.

"What?"

"That eagle. It must have been a mile or more. What attracted it?"

"Something he'd seen up in those rocks. They have eyes like telescopes."

"Have you ever been to those rocks?" I asked.

I think, mentally, he was already in slippers and into his after-dinner cigarette. "Rocks? Oh, yes. No." He was trying to sound interested. "I think they're called Spine Rocks but I've never been there. There are lots of places—views, rock formations—I haven't got around to yet. Ruth and I want to, but we only have our weekends and so far we haven't had much chance."

We were coming down into the dense pine and red shale belt. There were ruts where rains had cut deep into the red clay banks but there was nothing in them now but dust and a silt of pine needles. The scrub pines were so closely matted that the lower branches were without needles and there was no ground cover except the pine straw that was like a carpet. As we passed a break in the thicket I saw an abandoned frame house where someone had opened up a hillside farm and then given up. The old shell was falling in on itself.

"Those rocks," I said. "How would a person get there?"

"There's a paved road from the crossroads that goes over the mountain at the gap. People walk in from there." Red didn't sound enthusiastic.

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I told myself it was already too dark to go climbing around strange places. What would I look for, anyway? I was getting too impressionable.

We were approaching the crossroads which were nothing but a couple of farmhouses with their chins together and a tiny general store with blocks of yellow cattle salt stacked on the porch beside big balls of twine.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I nodded toward the Nehi sign over the store porch.

"Thanks." Red grinned. "Ruth will have supper ready and I don't want to keep her waiting."

He pulled the jeep to a stop beside my Jaguar roadster parked just off the north-south highway.

The other paved road cut back toward Sleepy Creek Mountain at an angle to the dirt road we'd come down from the tower.

I got out and stretched. "This is the road to those rocks?"

"Yes," Red said. "What time do we meet in the morning?"

"I appreciate all the trouble you've gone to," I said. "You really feel like giving up another day to this?"

"Well, you want to go back to the tower, don't you?"

"Yes. What time do you think? You know the hawks."

"Is seven-thirty early enough for you? They won't get moving much before eight."

"Seven-thirty," I said. "Here at the crossroads."

"Seven-thirty," Red said.

As he drove south toward Romney, Charm looked back at me from the seat beside him with those soulful eyes.

I got in the Jaguar and sat for a few minutes. Then I started north, toward the inn at Fairfax Springs. It was getting a little dark now to notice trees.

CHAPTER THREE

SUNDAY MORNING WAS THE KIND with fog in the valleys that would clear later into bright and sunny. There was no hurry about meeting Red—you couldn't have seen a hawk if it had been on your shoulder—but for some reason I wouldn't admit, I was at the crossroads half an hour early.

Red pulled up out of the fog a few minutes before 7:30.

"Not much of a day," I said.

"It may improve." Red lit a cigarette while Charm watched him with adoring eyes. "If we get enough wind for a flight it will carry this fog away."

"I've been thinking, Red, about that man."

"The man with the binocs?" Red asked.

"No, the one on the rocks yesterday. Would an eagle attack a man?"

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Red went into conference with his cigarette. "There are always stories but most of them aren't substantiated. I read about a bald eagle being filmed for a movie that didn't like the camera man because he played a flute. She went after him every chance she had."

"How about a golden?"

"Goldens are more vicious in their hunting habits. There's no doubt they're powerful enough to do a lot of damage. I suppose they might even kill a man if they had the courage or reason to attack."

"I'm thinking about those high rocks. They look awfully narrow. I wouldn't even want a bee making passes at me if I was up there."

He didn't say anything.

"Go ahead, look at me that way," I said, "but think about it. There was a man there. Then we saw an eagle make a dive. When I got up in the tower the eagle was taking off out of those rocks, but there was no man. He may be lying there with a broken leg or back."

"The thought has been eating at me all night long. That's why I want to go up there now and get it out of my mind."

We decided to take my Jaguar.

The road was almost as narrow and just as winding as the fire tower road but it was hard-topped.

At the gap on the summit the fog was still hanging low but squirming a little now and we could see the usual sediment of beer cans and paper plates that indicate people consider a place a beauty spot. There were tracks where cars had pulled off the road to enjoy the view of one sort or another. There was a path disappearing into the mist. There wasn't any car.

We let Charm out to snoop around and we lit cigarettes and settled down to wait for the fog to clear. The setter puppy came back every few minutes, just long enough to make sure her beloved Red was still there, and then limped off again — a little white long-eared phantom shuttling in and out of the fog.

Just before eight the fog began to move off, or more nearly, clear pockets moved in as the breeze picked up and, just as abruptly, the fog would drag across and close in again. This kept up for a while until we decided there were enough open periods to get to the rocks and look around. I took my binocs, though it seemed useless in the fog, and Red led the way up the path that climbed the shoulder of the mountain with Charm making scouting expeditions on either side.

We had gone about fifty or sixty yards when the path got steeper and I could feel the jagged surface of the rocks under

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my heavy walking shoes. Wind was carrying the mists away in great globs and the sun even broke through now and then, but it was pale and watery through particles of moisture in the air. I zippered the collar of my bush jacket tight around my throat and dug my hands ino my slacks pockets. Charm began to whine and wouldn't come any farther.

At first it was too foggy to see much but before long more of the gook cleared off. We worked our way out the narrow rocks, a step at a time. Once we were out on them, the fog withdrew completely like an unveiling. The suddenness of it left me hanging on with everything I had, trying to fight off dizziness and not look down. From the tower I had got no real notion of the size of these things. Red wasn't saying anything but I noticed he was being damned particular about where he stepped.

In a little while I got my equilibrium back and started moving again. Further on I found some dirty white fur and bones down in one of the crevices, probably carried there by some animal, and a few feathers that could have been from a farmer's flock of Leghorns, but nothing human.

"Red, I'm satisfied there's no one lying up here. If there was, we'd see him."

"I think you're right."

I'm beginning to get the rather unpleasant idea we're looking in the wrong place. If a man had been knocked off his feet by that eagle or lost his balance trying to dodge it, he wouldn't be here on top."

Red looked down over the side and got a tight expression about the mouth. I kept my eyes carefully on the point of rock I was holding to.

I couldn't say where he'd been standing, even if he'd still been here when the eagle made his dive. We decided to start with the base of the rocks on the east slope, partly because it seemed to be a little more exposed, partly because when I saw the eagle diving it seemed to be headed for that side, and we had to start with something. That meant going back along the path till we found a place to climb down near the southern end of the formation. By this time the fog was rising high above the narrow valley in puffs of cumulus that seemed to float in the sunshine.

When we got to the base of the cliff, Charm began nosing around with her usual enthusiasm while Red and I tried to visualize where a man would land if he'd fallen. The rocks were one of those formations that usually show themselves at gaps where the meat of the mountain has been torn away and even the bone is worn into sharp spikes,

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jutting nearly vertically where it has been pushed out of normal position by whatever force made the ridges. Chunks larger than a trailer truck had come loose and smaller ones had rolled down the mountain side. I had a nasty feeling above my belt that a man falling off the points fifty feet or more above me somehow wouldn't roll.

The big rocks strewn along the base of the cliff made it difficult to cover the ground efficiently. Some of them had mature trees growing on them with long tendril roots reaching down for nourishment. Once I thought one of them was a man's arm till I saw the surface of it, covered with peeling bark like desiccated skin. Charm was enjoying herself more than I was but I tried to keep up with Red as we moved along.

It happened without any warning, not even a shadow. Just Charm's frightened bark, like a twenty-gauge, and then her screams.

Red got around the corner of the boulder ahead of me. The big eagle had her down, smothering her with enormous half-folded wings, the long flat head scowling and extended like an obscene snake. There was a golden sheen on top and down the hackles on the neck, and the dark horn-colored beak kept opening and closing on thin air. Its feathered legs were spread wide in an awkward angle, one yellow foot the size of a man's hand completely covered Charm's face, the other clamped her over the hip joint and seemed to be trying to stretch her into something longer. I don't think Red broke his stride. He was into the bird, kicking it—trying to keep the wings out of his face. I got my hands on a piece of branch and was doing my best to beat it over the head without hitting Red. He had kicked it loose but it seemed more intent on getting back at Charm than attacking us. After one more hovering, flapping lunge at what lay on the ground the eagle became airborne and veered off. As it banked and soared away I saw a couple of bloody strips a foot or more in length still hanging from the half-closed talons. When I turned I could see why Charm had stopped screaming.

CHAPTER FOUR

I TRIED TO TELL RED she never knew what hit her, that it had been over so suddenly she hadn't suffered. Both of us knew better. It seemed to me the wind still carried the echo of her cries.

I did my best to get Red away from her but he insisted on gathering up what was left, wrapping it tenderly in his jacket. I led the way back to my roadster, trying

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not to see his agonized eyes.

Charm's leash, lying on the seat of the Jaguar when we got there, didn't make it any easier. I turned away and looked out over the narrow valley to the east. There was a good wind against my back and Third Hill, about a mile away at this gap, was in sunlight now. A dark shadow ,no more than a speck, was sliding along in the valley air and when I got my 12-powers on it I saw what it was. Yesterday I couldn't have distinguished between an eagle and a buzzard. Now I had an additional point of recognition—a dull loathing that surged up in me when I saw the characteristic broad flat wings, the lazy insolent soaring. I couldn't say it was *the* eagle. All it had to be was one of them. Yesterday getting one in my Leica view finder had been a thrill. Now all I wanted was to blast it out of the air and tramp its head in.

As I watched, the bird soared toward the side of the high point on Third Hill Mountain to the south, then as if it had received a radar impulse it turned, locked to the target and bored in. I decided it was another slaughter, more raw meat for that huge crop. But as I followed it in, the big wings back-beat like a duck settling onto water and then I saw it alight on the outstretched arm of a slender figure. I was too far away even with these glasses to be certain but again there was that feeling it might not be a man. It was in pants or jodhpurs and this time there was something about the shape and the way it moved—almost too graceful. It did something to the eagle's head, stroked it, maybe even fed the damned thing—I couldn't tell. It was sickening to see the big bird perched there as quiescent as a stuffed owl after what I had seen, it, or another one just like it, do. While I watched, the figure walked away into the woods still carrying the thing as if it were a baby.

I turned to tell Red but when I saw him just sitting there in the car waiting with his bundle in his lap I couldn't hurt him any more. He didn't seem to be aware of it when I got in beside him or when we started the trip back down the mountain.

When we came in sight of his jeep at the crossroads he spoke for the first time.

"If you don't mind—I'm a little sick of hawks. I hate to spoil your—"

"Forget it. I'm driving you home."

"No. I'd rather be alone."

"All right, Red. If you prefer. As long as I'm here I may as well try to get enough pictures for a story though God knows I don't care much about it now. Let me have the key to the tower. I'll mail it to you before I shove off for New York."

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He handed it to me without speaking.

"And, Red, thanks for your help. I wouldn't have had this happen for anything."

His big grip squeezed the knuckles of my hand. As he drove off, the seat beside him seemed terribly empty.

Getting the Jag up over the rocky road to the fire tower was a deal I hadn't accounted for. By the time I pulled into the clearing at the base of the metal framework the radiator was boiling and I was convinced that low-slung sports cars belong on paved highways. I got out my Leica and assorted junk, put the packages of sandwiches they'd fixed for me at the inn in the saddle pocket of my bush jacket and climbed the seven flights to the top. If wind meant hawks I was going to see plenty for it nearly tore my hat off while I unlocked the trap door to the tower cubicle.

Inside, it was pleasantly warm and cozy with the wind shut out. I settled down almost to a sense of enjoyment—when I could keep my mind off the earlier part of the morning and my responsibility for what had happened. I decided to get in touch with one of the better kennels and have them ship Red another setter, though even while I planned it I knew it wouldn't work.

Several shapes moving out of the north took my attention. Even I could tell they were hawks. I had to guess at most species. In a couple of hours my record showed 214 sharp-shins and 4 ospreys. There were three or four hundred other, all of which were lost on me except one I was sure was a red-tail from the color of his fan. I gave up on my counting but I shot yards of film—deciding to let some of my birdy friends identify them for me after I got back to New York.

Toward noon it quieted down as if the hawks were knocking off for lunch. I'd found myself looking over at the clearing on Third Hill all morning when I wasn't busy with the hawks.

For the first time I realized just what lay around me. There were a couple of houses back at the crossroads, a few up and down the valley along the highway. That was all, except the mountains and the silence.

I moved my binocs and studied the topographic map mounted on the table. There was the blue ribbon of the Potomac River, curving south at the upper end of Sleepy Creek and Third Hill mountains, fourteen or fifteen miles from here. The closely spaced brown contour lines of my mountain shaded off into the lighter canoe-shaped trough to the east, but there wasn't a house on that side anywhere in the valley. Even on Third Hill Mountain—nothing except one tiny black square that

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meant a house clinging to the west slope at the end of a broken-line road that hugged the steeper part of the ridge. I looked across but there was no sign of it, no old fields. I wondered if it was still there. Some of these maps hadn't been revised since the original surveys before 1900.

I rotated the brass pointer that was mounted on the table pivoting around the spot on the map that was this tower. I sighted it at Third Hill, at the opening in the trees. With my pencil I drew a light line on the map where the brass pointer crossed Third Hill. Then I found the gap on the map where the paved road crosses Sleepy Creek Mountain up at the rocks. Standing there this morning I had seen the eagle land on someone's arm—someone on a shelf on the side of the high part of Third Hill. Using my lunch paper as a straight-edge I found a line from the road gap to the spot as nearly as I could locate it by the contours of the map—and drew another pencil line. The two lines intersected less than half an inch from the little black mark that was a house—or had been when this map was made.

Allowing for error, especially on the second line, the figure I had seen yesterday and today could have been standing in relatively the same place, not—according to scale—over half a mile from the location of that house.

I wondered how I'd go about finding them—if I wanted to search them out. I was in a fixed spot, call it X. So far I had placed them on the opposite ridge. How would I know them if I saw them unless they went around with an eagle on their wrist?

Something jangled on the wall beside my head. I almost knocked my tripod over.

The ranger's telephone rang again.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Is THIS THE RANGER in Sleepy Creek tower?" The voice had a nasal quality that might have been the wire, but each syllable was exactly right.

"No. There's no ranger on duty here."

"Who is it speaking?"

"I'm here on a hawk watch. You wouldn't know me."

"If you don't mind, I'll have to have your name." He was getting pained but still correct as hell.

"I'm Charles Gra . . ." I was damned if I was going to be handled like that. "Don't worry about me. I have permission to be up here. Who are you?"

I waited for a while but the line had gone dead so I hung up.

If that had been a Conservation Commission man he'd know

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I had permission or I'd never have had the key to get in the tower. It could have been some stuffed shirt further up the line but I didn't think so. I picked up the receiver and jiggled the hook. Nothing happened. I did it some more and then tried the little crank. That got me a woman's voice that said, "What number did you want?"

"Operator, did you put through a call to me just now?"

"Yes, but they hung up."

"I know. Can you tell me who that was?"

"I'm sorry, sir. That call was from a pay phone."

"Try to find where the phone is located."

"I'm sorry, sir. It was along the Sleepy Creek road but I don't know which one. There are several gas stations with pay phones."

I thanked her and went back to my thinking. The more time I gave to it the more I began to feel like a piece of Camembert under a glass lid, stuck up here on top of the world for everyone to examine.

There were hawks coming over but they didn't appeal to me. I had all the pictures I needed for a hawk feature, so I decided it was time to go.

I checked to make sure none of my equipment was lying around. All I saw was a pencil Charm had been chewing on yesterday. I took one more look into the north through the glasses, turned them east to Third Hill just across the valley and, finding nothing but scenery, climbed down through the trap door and snapped the padlock.

On my way up the valley toward the Springs I stopped at each filling station and inquired about who had made calls this afternoon. There had been too many people stopping in—tourists out to see the October color. Weeding out any one person was impossible.

I knew there was something about that mountain that worked on me. Now that I was down off it I could view several things more normally. Somebody wanted the ranger—I hadn't been decent enough to be polite. There had been a man yesterday on those rocks before we saw the eagle dive. He had to have a car—there had been no car up there this morning. If anything had happened to him, the car couldn't drive itself. I reminded myself that my problem has always been to keep my imagination on solid footing.

I was approaching the edge of Fairfax Springs, a village that had been a spa since the Revolution. Its old brick houses with faded blue green shutters looked as cherished as its ancient trees standing out from the curb, carefully paved around when the

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street was eventually widened.

As I nosed the Jag along under the big elms and maples, dripping color in the late afternoon, a pleasant glow came over me. By the time I parked beside the boxwood at the side of the inn and walked into the warm lobby with its antiques and nice old people I was feeling absolutely mellow.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY SERVE AN EARLY DINNER at the inn. If you aren't in the dining room by 6:30 you're considered unworthy of their food.

After my day in the wind and clear air up on the mountain I was in the mood for nourishment.

Part way through my meal the doors from the lounge opened and a colored man in a white coat moved like a soft-spoken somnambulist among the tables paging a Mr. Parnell or Purcell. No one responded and he tiptoed out and closed us up again.

Almost everyone had left when I finished my cigarette and coffee.

The lounge had another log fire and a bridge game going at one end. There was more early American furniture, lithographs and one choice piece that dominated the place—a regulation bathroom scales just inside the entrance door. Two old ladies on a love seat were asking the porter to go out and tell them what kind of evening it was.

As I walked through, one of the women clerks behind the desk looked up and saw me.

"There was a call for you this afternoon, Mr. Gratton."

I thought of Red and asked if there had been a message.

"It was some man calling to inquire if one of our guests had been in the Sleepy Creek fire tower yesterday afternoon. He was trying to get in touch with him—I think he said to return something he had lost. I knew you had been up there so I gave him your name."

I loosened a piece of cigarette paper stuck to my lip. "Did he tell you who he was?"

"I asked if he wanted to leave his name but he had hung up." She fluttered her eyelashes to show interest in my problem. "I do hope you find whatever you have lost."

"This person—what was his voice like?"

"Well-bred. Definitely a gentleman."

"What else did you tell him besides my name?"

"I gave him your New York address but I said I understood you planned to be here a few days longer." She smiled reassuringly. "I expect you'll be hearing from him."

In my room, I closed the door

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and turned the key. The radiator under the window was making a hissing sound but the room felt cold. I stepped into the bathroom and ran hot water over my hands and then drew a glass from the cold faucet, corroded from the "beneficial" sweet-tasting stuff piped from the mineral springs. I spit it out. I went back to the bed and stretched crosswise on it and lit another cigarette and lay there, looking at the ceiling.

I knew I hadn't left anything in the tower yesterday afternoon. If I had, it would have been there locked up when I returned today. Someone was focussing on that tower trying to find out who was in it. Someone with binoculars over on Third Hill. I told myself to stop running away with this. It was probably normal enough—a lot of disjointed circumstances that I was dramatizing into something strange. A half inch of cigarette ash fell onto the bed. I brushed it away and rubbed out the butt and lit another one.

If it was so damned normal what about those calls? If there had been only one I could shrug it off as coincidence. I went back over the whole routine and always I came up against those probing calls. This time I stopped trying to see it the way I hoped it was and looked at it the other way.

Now, I had seen something I wasn't supposed to be in on, or at least my seeing it was bothering somebody enough for them to want to reach me. There was no question about his knowing I had seen him. We had been staring into each other's binoculars. Mine were 12-powers; I liked to think his weren't as powerful. I had been in a fixed position—he had been over on a mountain and I had no way of knowing where he was now. I remembered the sun had been behind me so he probably couldn't tell much about me, just that I was watching him through glasses. For that matter, I wouldn't recognize him either.

This thing could develop into a blind duel, each of us groping for the other. This afternoon he had made the first move. All he learned was that the person in the tower today was not the ranger. Later on—or maybe he'd made the call at the same time from the pay phone—he had pin-pointed me as having been in the fire tower yesterday, name: Charles Gratton, address: Yale Club in New York, immediate location: can be found at the inn at Fairfax Springs for the next few days. So far he wasn't doing bad, thanks to the nice old thing at the desk downstairs.

I turned down the bedclothes and got into my pajamas. After I snapped off the light I lay down.

The place dies at 9:15 and the utter quiet should have helped me sleep. It didn't. For one thing, the

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room was too hot now. I got up and shoved the window all the way up and turned off the steam. It didn't do any good.

I got up from the bed and turned on the lamps. Suppose there had been something odd yesterday. I couldn't swear there was any connection between the eagle and the man who had been standing on the rocks. It had been at least twenty minutes after I saw him before we saw the eagle. And anyway we'd done our best to check on that this morning and there hadn't even been a car. So what did I have to get bothered about?

I thought about that figure this morning, after Charm was killed, carrying that eagle away as if it had been a child, or a little tin god. The voice making the calls had been a man's but there was something revoltingly effeminate about the figure and the way it moved.

This reaching for me, out of nowhere. Twice. It proved I wasn't dreaming it all up. And all I could do was sit and wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I WOKE MONDAY FEELING a little better, mentally, about myself. Physically, I felt like hell.

After breakfast I went back to my room and packed the film I'd shot in the tower Saturday and Sunday and got it ready to mail to the darkroom technician who does my stuff.

I removed the Telyt lens, slung my Leica around my neck in its leather case and with the saddle pockets of my bush jacket bulging with light meter and junk I went down to the Jaguar, looking like an amateur photographer all set for some shots of the local views.

I stopped at the post office to insure my package of films and then headed south.

I turned left, taking the hard-top road instead of the buffalo trail wobbling off toward the fire tower. At the gap near the rocks on top of Sleepy Creek Mountain I saw an old log road I hadn't noticed in the fog yesterday. It looked as if it went back along the west face of the mountain. I pulled past it onto the wide area at the path to the rocks. There was no fog today but except for that it looked the same. It wasn't a place I cared to linger but I got my binoculars out and studied the valley and Third Hill Mountain over on the other side.

It was a sunny day with Indian Summer haze hanging between the ridges. With a little searching I found what I thought was the shelf of the mountain where the eagle landed yesterday, over a

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mile air line southeast from where I stood. I tried to judge where the square black mark on the topographic map had indicated a house. Then I climbed in and pulled the Jaguar onto the road.

I let it roll down the slope toward the narrow valley. These two mountain ridges shut in a groove of this world that must have been the same two hundred years ago. I've photographed African bush and jungle in Brazil, mountains like the Andes and the Canadian Rockies, but it's odd about close-to-home wilderness—you never expect it here. I could imagine living in a place like this, seeing almost no one, with these mountain walls shutting out everything till they warped you into thinking you were God.

The road dropped to cross a trout stream with clear water trickling over stones into its half-filled pools, made a sharp turn on the far side and began the pull up, like a tired horse that knows the job ahead of it.

As I rounded a curve on the side of Third Hill I came to a mailbox on the right. It was at the entrance to a single-width road or lane, using the terms loosely, running south into the trees along the mountain. This, I knew, was it.

I got out and walked over to the mailbox. It was rusty and there was no name on it. What I'd first thought was a tree snag smothered in honeysuckle was an old brick column or square pillar. It had two iron pintles where a gate had hung. The gate and the other brick pillar had disappeared. The lane was soft looking with leaves floating in black water in its ruts and I knew I'd hang up if I tried to take the Jag over it.

I got my right wheels off the paved road which meant blocking the entrance to the lane. There were tracks from tires going in or out but from the looks of the place they might have been someone using it for a turn-around. I locked the ignition, decided I didn't want to show up around here with binoculars so I put them in the rear compartment and locked it. Then I started along the lane.

It clung to the side of Third Hill like a vine. The climb was gradual and, under other circumstances, following this old road through vivid color back along the mountain it would have been beautiful. I kept looking for signs of its being used. All I found was one type of tire tread, a sort of parallelogram or diamond pattern.

I walked what seemed a long time before I came to an opening in the trees. It was on the upper side of the road—an ancient apple orchard like rows of twisted skeletons set out to bleach in the sun. Several had made a last convulsive effort to put out leaves that

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cast thin, fluttering shadows on the trunks. There were even a few prune-like apples withered on the twigs that nothing had been starved enough to eat. At the end of the orchard the thick cover closed in again. Then, just when I thought I had another stretch of woods ahead of me, I was looking at the house.

There was no clearing. The trees simply reached higher and met overhead. It was as though they had drawn nourishment from the family who had lived there or the house, sucking it dry and leaving it an inert shell. In summer they would cut out all light; now they let it through like a golden filter. The lane approached the end of the house and then, just before it got there, turned right in a rather pretentious arc around the lower side and disappeared beyond. The house was of crumbling old brick with shutters at the lower windows that had once been painted white. The small panes of glass looked opaquely black with reflections of yellow leaves in them like the puddles in the lane. There was no verandah, just stone steps and a paneled door once white like the shutters and, above it, a fanlight that seemed to grow like a graceful, delicate fungus. It was damp under the trees and cold as a cave on a hot day, but because of the yellow leaves it wasn't dark. They were everywhere, above and underfoot and some had sifted down and clung to a giant straggly boxwood that must have been as old as the house.

I was in the yard now. I think at one time there had been an opening or outlook on the lower side of the house, for there were several very large trees choked to half their height by a tangle of second growth, the kind that muscles in when allowed to grow unchecked. It looked as if it had been taking over for the last twenty years or more. Judging from the spacing of the gnarled old giants rising above the usurpers, there must have, years ago, been a magnificent view across the valley to Sleepy Creek Mountain from the lawn. Now time and the second growth had changed all that, smothering the house. Or maybe it was shutting out the world; I couldn't quite decide.

I thought the place was deserted till I moved around the boxwood. In the wispy, leaf-strewn grass something straightened and peered at me, like a woodchuck that strains for a sound it can't identify. It was a tiny colored woman, gnarled and ancient as the old apple trees back the lane and with a face as wrinkled as their fruit. There was a faded blue scarf tied around her skull and knotted in front, and one thin hand had a crooked grasp on some twigs that looked brittle like the bony fingers. The

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other hand kept a fixed grip on her apron gathered into a pouch that held more twigs. Under the black coat and the checked apron I could see a purple cotton dress that reached the ground.

She was standing quiet, partly bent, peering to the left of me with cloudy eyes like an old dog's. I nodded but she went on looking past me and I realized she was as blind as the windows of the house.

"How do you do?" I saw her flinch. "I was taking a walk and I came out the lane. Who lives here?"

She let the sticks fall into her apron. Then she held the hand above the smoky eyes as if to shade them from sunlight that wasn't there and said, "Who is you?"

"You wouldn't know me. I'm just out for a walk."

The black leathery face was reaching for me. "Who is you, you don't know, Mr. Anson Metcalf?"

"Cricket, quit talking to your..."

The girl came around the corner of the house and stopped, staring as if she was looking at something she'd never seen before. She had nothing on me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE WAS TALL and awfully young, probably not eighteen, with dark honey hair tied back with a ribbon. She had on leather-fronted shooting pants and a tight-fitting wine colored suede vest over a yellow short sleeved shirt. The pale hazel eyes were deep-set and lighter than the hair and the small nose looked as if a sculptor had, on second thought, reworked and refined the nostrils and bridge, spreading the form with his thumbs into the planes of the wide cheekbones, leaving the nose rather turned-up and almost too sensitive for the width of face.

She had a slender waist, broad shoulders, long legs and arms that all showed structural details a little too clearly—too thin and kiddish for a luscious shape but the kind of lanky figure with small high breasts and angular pelvis that sporting clothes hang on nicely. Her right hand was lean as a boy's, the other I couldn't see. It was cased in a huge glove like a hockey gauntlet. On the stiff leather fist, hooded in a funny little tufted cap, sat a hawk about the size of a crow.

Her lips weren't very full which added to the boyish look but the mouth was large and the light eyes together with those cheekbones gave her a sort of feline expression. She wasn't beautiful

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but I had the idea her face would have a certain piquancy if she ever smiled. Right now, she wasn't.

I could see it was going to be up to me to make conversation.

"Are you Mr. Metcalf's daughter?"

"He's my brother." Her voice was husky as if it hadn't been wasted on many words.

"I'm on a camera holiday." I tapped my Leica. "Your lane looked interesting so I just kept walking. Would you let me take a picture of that falcon? That's what it is, isn't it?"

"It's a tercel." She said it as if I ought to know these things.

"Is that a kind of falcon?"

"It's a male peregrine. A female would be called a falcon."

I gathered it was like calling a female dog a dog—or inversely.

"I'd like to get him in sunlight if we can find a spot," I said.

She seemed a little more relaxed now we were talking about the hawk and said she would put him on his block. I had no idea what that was but I walked around to the back of the house with her with the old colored woman limping after us.

"Can she get around alone?" I moved my head toward the bent form behind me.

"Cricket?" She seemed surprised and then said, "Yes."

"She is blind, isn't she?"

"She knows her way. She's been here so long."

"Do you live here with your parents?"

She gave me that odd defensive look again. "There are just Brother and I. And Cricket."

A block was an urn-shaped piece of wood about twice as large as an eggplant, streaked with droppings, stuck vertically in the ground on a peg. The girl took the hooded falcon from her fist. There was a tinkling sound as she set him on the flat top of the block where his enormous yellow feet with their dark talons curving like a surgeon's needles grasped it as if he were perched atop a big lotus blossom. I saw that he had tiny brass bells on his legs. There were leather thongs around each ankle and these were attached to the snap swivel of a leash the girl had been holding. Without unfastening any of them, she tied the other end of the leash to a ring anchored to a hoop around the perching block.

Once there, the falcon waited patiently. The girl removed the glove from her left hand, which was less tanned than the right, and untied the laces of his hood and took it off as gently as if she were removing a baby's bonnet. The hawk blinked his dark eyes a few times and ruffled his feathers with a rattling sound that somehow gave him a contented air. With his hood off he was a honey.

He fixed me with his dark brown eye set in a light circle,

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seeing in me something strange to his world. I noticed that his upper beak was notched near the dark end as if the sharp point had been honed down even sharper.

"That beak looks vicious," I said.

"They never use their beaks to strike," the girl said in her low voice, "but don't get near his talons." She was making soothing sounds at him that I found strangely fascinating myself.

Kneeling here beside this girl, it was unreal; it wasn't in this day or age. The unintelligible cooing words were doing their work on me as much as on the hawk. There was something hypnotic about it, also something wrong. Then I realized I had a feeling that someone was watching us.

I don't know how long it had been going on. It was one of those cumulative things that finally make themselves felt when your senses reach the saturation point. Whatever it was, the falcon noticed it. After his first shock at seeing me he had relaxed under the sedative tones of his mistress. But now his feathers lay close and streamlined against his body and he leaned forward, his long pointed wings half unfolded, the belligerent look in his eye again. This time he wasn't looking at me. I got off my knees and turned.

On the lower level of the rear porch, just at the edge, crouching with his head low, the largest Doberman I'd ever seen pinned me with his yellow eyes. I could have sworn he hadn't been on that porch when we came around. If he had growled I'd have felt a little better but he just crouched there, black as death and perfectly motionless. It was the girl's reaction as much as the Doberman's attitude that got me.

She didn't turn her face but her whisper reached me—*Don't move*—and then to the Doberman: "Luger, don't you dare." It was a command as loud and firm as she could make it but I could see it run off the dog like a drop of water. His shining muscles bunched but he stayed there, cocked, the long chestnut colored muzzle pointing at me like a gun. The girl started walking toward him, slowly, carefully, like an attendant approaching a demented patient that has got loose. I kept my eyes fastened on the dog's and felt the girl getting closer to him. At the edge of the porch her hand went down with painful slowness and the finger slid under the choker chain around his neck.

That did it. His lunge brought her off the porch but she stuck to him. I started toward them.

"Stay back. He'll kill you."

From the looks of him I believed her. He was on his haunches now with his forepaws off the ground, leaning against the chain collar and snarling with

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a gurgling, strangled sound through a row of teeth like a log saw.

"Luger. No." She pulled at the collar with both hands and managed to drag him, his nails scratching across the porch floor boards, toward a door. She got it open and forced him in. As she slammed it shut, she muttered, "Black devil" at the outside panels of the door.

She came toward me, looking at her hands. I saw that the chain had torn the skin on two of her fingers and they were bleeding. I reached out and took her hand.

"Shouldn't you put something on that?" I asked.

She shook her head and frowned. "He won't obey me."

"He's your dog?"

"He's Brother's."

"Did he name him Luger?"

She nodded, sucking her hand, and turned to the falcon. It had evidently been frightened off its perching block during the excitement. Now it cowered as far away as the leash would reach.

She crossed to the bird in a few long strides. "That devil's made him bate. If he's broken any pinions I'll . . ."

"Made him what?"

"Bate. Dive off his block."

She knelt down with the strange cooing sound and very gently slipped the hood on him and tied the drawstrings. Then she examined first the wings and then the tail feathers, spreading them gently as if they were something very precious.

"He's not hurt but he'll never let you take his picture on the block."

"I want him on your arm anyway. Where can we get some sunlight?"

"I was going to exercise him in the orchard."

"Fine," I said.

"He probably won't do well, upset like this but I'll try."

"Swell," I said. "But before we go, is your brother home?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to meet him."

She looked as if I'd asked to see Elizabeth II at 7:45 in the morning. "I'll have to find out if he'll see you."

She went into the house through the same door she'd used for the Doberman. I walked around the hooded hawk and hoped I would not see any more of Luger, ever. I lit a smoke. There were several small outbuildings on the slope above the house, back toward the lane. In the other direction, I could see where the driveway curved around and went on through the trees.

It seemed to be taking her God-almighty brother long enough to make up his mind. I looked up at the small-paned windows and wondered which part of the house he was in.

After a while she came out and

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closed the door behind her.

"Brother regrets that he will be unable to meet you this morning."

It sounded so damned polite I had the feeling I was being shown off the place. He had his cheek for a young kid but it was his home and that was that.

"I'm sorry, too," I said. "Get your falcon and let's go."

She led the way along the flagstone walk that passed the outbuildings. They had wire netting over the windows.

"More pets?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

Some hysterical white hens flapped off the window sills as we approached, disappearing into the dusty gloom inside. In a runway attached to the second building several large pink-eyed albino rabbits came to the wire and twitched their noses inquiringly. It was nice to find something around this place that wasn't a bunch of nerves.

"Do you keep your falcon in one of these pens?"

She looked annoyed but all she said was "No."

We were in the lane now with conversation not exactly flowing. I walked beside her, on the far side from the hawk, and let her set the pace.

She was only a few inches shorter than I am—I'd say five feet eight, which is a lot of girl but I don't think she'd go more than a hundred and twenty. She looked very clean and scrubbed—I'm not used to them without any make-up—and the tan had kidskin highlights at the turn of the planes in her face and throat. I liked the way the eyebrows swept back around the outer bones of her forehead, and under the yellow cotton shirt and suede vest she gave promise of growing into something smoother. Even so, there are a lot of HARPER'S BAZAAR models getting along very nicely with no more than she already had.

"What is your first name?" I asked. "I can't call you Miss Metcalf."

There was a moment I thought she hesitated and then she said, "Dana."

"It's a nice name. Have you lived here all your life?"

"Almost."

"Just you and your brother, what's his name—"

"Anson."

"—just you and Anson. Don't you get lonesome?" I asked.

"Why should I?" she demanded.

"I don't know. You run the house, I suppose?"

"There's Cricket. She's always taken care of us."

We had come to the old graveyard of an orchard now, with its row of tortured ghosts. She left the lane and climbed the slope ahead of me and stopped and stroked the hawk.

"While I'm getting acquainted,

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does the falcon have a name?"

"You keep calling *him* a falcon."

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "The tercel. Does he have a name?"

"Butcher Boy."

"Oh lovely," I said. "I suppose your brother named him, too?"

"It was Brother's idea," she said.

"Let's sit down here till those clouds move off the sun. Then we'll see if we can get a picture of Butcher Boy and you."

I stretched out on the dry, wiry grass. She sat down, cross-legged, not too close, with her gauntleted left forearm resting on her knee and made sounds at the hooded hawk, still perched on her fist. I offered her a cigarette but she shook her head.

I lit one and then blew out the match, still holding the folder in fingers.

"What does that say?" she asked.

I saw she was referring to the match folder in my hand.

"S.S. United States." I reached over and laid it on her knee. "I came back on it last time."

"You've been to Europe?" She was turning the match book over and over with her free hand.

"A few times," I said. "Do you ever have any desire to travel, Dana? Go to far-off places?"

"My father's going to take me to Europe," she said. "Maybe this fall."

"But you said there was just you and your brother," I said.

"Father doesn't live here and our mother is dead."

"You sounded as if you were looking forward to that trip abroad. And yet you seem to love all this." I waved my hand.

"I'll never leave this, for good." She looked up at the sky. "I want to live here, always. It's just that —well, the other sounds interesting." She was letting her fingers play with the hawk again.

Her voice kept flowing over me like soft, tepid water. I think she was saying something about the trip and her father. I wasn't listening. I was watching her mouth, her small white teeth. I realized she was smiling—a dreamy, inaccessible smile that had nothing to do with the way I was looking at her. She must have noticed it.

"I think the sun is out now." She got up and brushed the leaves and grass from the seat of her shooting pants.

I followed her up the hillside without talking.

When she stopped, I set my Leica at 1/1000.

"Let me get you as you release him," I said. "Or do you say cast him?"

"Throw him off," she corrected.

She moved to a gap in the old apple trees and unhooded the hawk, turning to see if I was ready.

I cleared up the image in the

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range finder and, keeping her centered, said, "Any time."

She raised her arm and I got it just as the hawk left her fist. It circled into the wind till it reached an altitude far above us where it seemed satisfied to go round and round.

I looked at Dana. She was standing flat-chested, with her pelvis thrown forward like a lanky boy's, her ungloved right hand grasping her left arm behind her back. The wind whipped the pants against her slender thighs and away from her bare ankles above flat-heeled loafers but she seemed unaware of anything but the wheeling speck in the sky.

"What happens next?" I moved closer.

"He's reached his pitch. We call it 'point of pride.'"

"Go on. Tell me more."

She was still staring at the sky, her head thrown back and I watched her smooth graceful throat.

"He's trained to 'wait on.' He'll stay up there till game is flushed or I call him in."

"Are eagles ever trained as falcons?" I didn't take my eyes off her throat. I thought the bone process at the angle of her jaw came a little sharper.

"I've read about it." She seemed to be telling it to the sky.

I didn't force it. "How do you call him in?" I asked.

She put her ungloved hand into the pouch hanging at her side and brought out a small leather bag with a long line attached. She began swinging it high around her head by the line. As she did it she gave a shrill crying note. She did it with her throat and it carried better than a whistle.

The hawk must have been expecting it. He let the circle he was describing run out and seemed to fold, coming at us like a stone. I noticed a whining sound that raised in tone to a shrill whistle and he was on us with legs extended, leather tongs trailing. Suddenly the swinging lure wasn't there. The hawk pulled out of his dive in a zoom that must have nearly scooped his entrails out and reached for altitude again.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I jerked the lure away," she said. "I'll let him have it his next stoop."

She was swinging it in the air again.

"What are those thongs that hang from his legs?"

"We call them jesses."

Butcher Boy was getting set. This time he hadn't climbed so high. He came with his wings tight against his body. There was a punky sound as he hit the bag and fastened to it.

I shot a couple of pictures of him while he was worrying it on the ground. Dana moved over and

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picked him up, letting him retain his grasp on the lure.

"What's that he's eating?" I asked.

"Meat tied to the lure."

"Why is that?"

"It teaches him to kill," she said.

Butcher Boy looked as if he enjoyed his class work.

"I'm beginning to see a use for those white rabbits you have back there. Am I right?"

She went on watching the hawk without answering me.

"If you're ashamed of it, why do you do it?" I asked.

Her chin came up and her pale eyes flared. "If we furnish targets for training we're saving other game, aren't we?" She was breathing faster.

"Yes. If you've got to have targets."

"Our hawks take no more game than if they were flying wild," she said. "You sound like one of those Conservation Commission people."

"Hawks plural? How many do you have?"

Her voice dropped but it seemed to be an effort. "We've had different ones. Peregrines—" she stroked Butcher Boy— "aren't suited to this country but Brother keeps on trying. The goshawk we had was better but Brother says they're for peasants. The one we had was manic-depressive, Brother said."

I wondered how much those two had had in common but she seemed talkative so I let her talk.

"They're hard to get. Butcher Boy was an eyas."

"That probably means something," I said.

"Brother bought him from a man who took him from the nest."

"You don't have an eagle?" I drove it in bluntly.

"People see wild eagles and because we have hawks they blame them on us." She was looking at me too steadily.

"Blame them?"

"The Conservation men think every hawk belong to us. One of them shot a peregrine for us."

"I'm not talking about peregrines," I said. "I saw an eagle land near here."

Her eyes didn't move from mine.

"I never knew I could hate anything so much," I said.

"Hawks balance nature." She seemed to be reciting.

"I can't get enthusiastic about nature's balance when I see an eagle cut a setter puppy into boot laces—especially when I have to look at the face of the boy who worshipped her."

In the distance a bell began to toll.

"I have to go now," she said. "That's Cricket calling me."

I wondered.

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CHAPTER NINE

A BELL PINGED TWICE as I pulled up to the tanks in front of a garage on the edge of Fairfax Springs. A thin boy in a cap and dun coveralls came away from a knot of people around a car in the shop and began to wipe my windshield.

"Fill it, please."

"Yes sir." As he walked to the tank he let his eyes slide over the Jaguar as if it were a girl in shorts. "Nice job you got."

"It runs."

"See what they brought us over there in the shop?"

It was a dark green Cadillac convertible with its rear end still hanging from the tow truck. I knew it was a dark green Cadillac because the gold V was still intact and there were a few places where the mud didn't cover the finish. The convertible part I arrived at because no other top could have caved in so completely.

"What happened?" I asked.

"State Police found it in the Potomac this morning. Went off a back road up there on one of those high points. They had a hell of a time gettin' it out."

"When's the funeral?"

"They ain't found him yet. They're still lookin' in the river."

"From the condition of that car, he didn't swim away. How much?"

He gave me my change and worked a little more on my windshield.

"Where will I find the game warden?" I asked.

"Conservation officer? He's in the courthouse if he ain't out in the woods. Did he git you for something?"

I said no and moved off.

I was looking for the courthouse but on one of the tree-lined streets something protruding from the corner of a building stopped me.

The architecture itself was early Saratoga Resort, with a high cast-iron verandah across the front, the floor about level with your eyes. It was still a hotel but it had slipped into the strictly commercial category. What made me pause on the sidewalk was one of those red and white striped cylinders with a ball cap and base you used to see outside of barber shops. This one was the elaborate kind that revolved inside a glass shell. It didn't look as though it had done any revolving recently.

The barber shop was in a half basement reached by steps under the hotel verandah. I went down. Maybe it was crazy but sometimes I've had hunches that paid off.

The place looked very large without lights, and deserted. There was an octagonal marble pedestal with four basins and goose-neck faucets in the center

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of the tiled floor. A mirror covered the left side of the room above a marble shelf with the usual bottles grouped in front of each of six golden oak barber chairs. There was a row of oak armchairs under another mirror on the right wall with clusters of lyre-shaped coat hooks above. It all looked like some pretentious ruin after a decline from better days. I decided everyone had gone to a fire. As I turned to leave, a voice reached for me from somewhere in the gloom.

"You're next, suh. The first chair by the window." It was the slowest voice that ever spoke.

Something climbed down out of a high-backed boot-black chair and laboriously clicked a switch. A row of morning-glory-shaped lights bloomed in pairs along both walls and I saw a little colored man in a gray linen coat who looked like the male counterpart of Cricket. He was holding an unfolded paper with part of a sandwich in it and a half-full bottle of chocolate milk that he started to set on the shoe shine chair he'd been in.

"Finish your lunch," I said. "I'll look around."

A battery of pigeonhole compartments covered the wall to the left of him at the far end of the shop. I walked over. Nearly all of them were occupied with elaborately decorated shaving mugs in monogrammed and floral designs. I estimated better than sixty, complete with shaving brushes.

I pointed to the mugs. "Do you mind telling me a little about these?"

He hobbled over, his chocolate skin wrinkled into a smile. He had put on steel-framed spectacles which made him look like a sleepy Mahatma Gandhi.

"You seem to have a lot of customers," I said.

He shook his head slowly. "Most of those gen'men gone on, suh." He said it very sadly. "Only five still livin'."

"Were they all local men?" I asked.

He took his glasses off and polished them, blinking.

"Lots of them was summer folks, come down from the cities to take the waters. Back when Fairfax Springs was really something. Come back each year, each gen'man come in here for his own barber."

"You had other barbers?"

"We had all six chairs workin,' suh." He grew an inch in height. "When Fairfax Springs was something."

"I imagine you remember most of your customers well," I said casually.

"Deed I do." He took down a pale number done in forget-me-nots and gold initials. "Some of the ladies used to hand-paint their hubands' shaving mugs in those days. This is Mr. Morgan with the

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posies. He only wanted once over."

"Did you ever have a client by the name of Metcalf?" I asked.

He picked a mug from the lower row, black with an intricate Old English M in gold.

"There," he said proudly, "is Mr. Anson Metcalf. One hot towel and twice over. A fine gen'man."

"You know the family?"

"I ought to, suh. Done their barberin' almost since I started workin' here in nineteen hundred." He put the mug carefully in its place.

"While you work on me," I followed him to the furthest chair, "tell me a little about Mr. Metcalf. Any man with a shaving mug like that must be interesting."

I sat down on the cracked black leather seat and said to give me a trim, fairly close. I noticed the bottles at the other chairs were empty.

"Mr. Metcalf started coming here after his own hotel burned down. Always come to me. Say no one but Jeff could shave him right. Stop in every time he come to town." He'd begun to nibble at the back of my neck with a pair of hand clippers.

"You say he owned a hotel?"

"The Metcalf House, suh. Over next to the mineral springs. Burned down 'long about nineteen two."

"You're talking about a different Anson Metcalf," I said. "I'm thinking of a much younger man."

"That's young Mr. Anson. He's the grandson." In the mirror I could see him shaking his head. "That's different, suh. Yessuh, mighty different."

He laid down his clippers and started with his comb and scissors.

I let him get under way and then I asked, "You know him?"

"Yessuh, he come in 'bout once every two months with his hair long and straggledly. Young Mr. Anson don't take the care in his looks like his granddaddy did."

"What about the father? Old Anson's son?"

"He used to come in here." We weren't making much progress because every time he talked he stopped cutting. "Mr. John Metcalf never seemed to be the man his daddy was. He was a gen'man. I don't mean he wasn't, but beside old Mr. Anson drivin' up and tyin' his fast horses out in front, Mr. John never seemed to have much subject to him. You know the kind, suh."

He scratched his gray mossy head and chuckled.

"For all of that, he married one mighty handsome lady. Yessuh. Miss Belle, she was a beauty."

"Really?"

"Mr. John, he twice as old as Miss Belle, they say. No one never thought he had it in him."

After a while I said, "You don't see young Anson very often?"

"Nosuh. He live 'way back up

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on the mountain and no one see him much. Always been peculiar. Make me use his granddaddy's mug and brush on him. Want everything just like the old days." His reflection watched me from the mirror. "They say nothing's been changed up at the old home. No electric, nothing different from the way his granddaddy had it." He shook his head. "And if that's how young Mr. Anson want it, I can tell you that's how it gwine to be. He that kind of young gen'man. Have his way or bust."

"What does this young Mr. Anson look like?" I asked.

He stopped again to do his thinking. "It strange about young Mr. Anson," he said. "He come in here and he go out. Then a long time pass and he come and go again and after he gone it's hard to say what he look like. Ain't no one look like young Mr. Anson, I don't guess."

"Well," I made an effort, "is he big?"

"Cain't say he look big but he seem big. Yessuh, guess it's that he talk and feel big."

"Is he light complexioned?"

"His hair dark. Real black and long. But his skin, it white."

"His face—what's it like?"

"Best as I can remember it always look unhappy. Like somethin' hurt inside. Kind of hard for me to remember much how my gen'men look. They all look like their shaving mugs settin' back there in rows. That's how I think young Mr. Anson look. Like that shaving mug—gold and black."

I thought about that for a long time while he droned on.

CHAPTER TEN

THE COURTHOUSE WAS a rather small building sitting back in some elm trees behind an iron fence. It was that old kind of red brick with an orange tinge and it looked as if there ought to be Civil War militia bivouacked on the lawn.

The conservation officer was a leathery man with a stiff neck that went straight down from the ears and his eyes were like slits with deep wrinkles at the outer corners. I thought he was grinning till he smiled and then it looked too empty—a smile that showed no teeth. He wore a hard-visored cap and olive green shirt and breeches. His cartridge belt made the breeches sag below his belly like a child with its diaper at half-mast.

"What can I do for you?" He moved over to his desk and leaned on it and yawned.

I introduced myself. I didn't feel it registered but I went on. "Do you know some people named Metcalf up on Third Hill Mountain?"

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"Yes. Anson." He kept his lips pinched tight as if he'd just taken a spoonful of mineral oil.

"What sort of person is he?"

"High and mighty." He settled back against the edge of the desk. "One of those dickey bird people who thinks you shouldn't kill a hawk even if you catch it with its claws in game."

"Have you known him long?"

He unwrapped a stick of gum, doubled it up and put it in his mouth. "Since he was a kid. Kind-of a mother's boy."

"What does he do for a living?"

"He don't hafta do nothing. His old man left him well-heeled." When he chewed, his cap moved up and down. "He never done nothing as far as I know but fly hawks from the time he was a kid."

"Any law against flying falcons?"

"In some states they'd get him for hunting with an illegal device. Then there's having a protected species of hawk in your possession."

"Ever arrest him for those offenses?"

"That's pretty hard to do." He was the kind who could belch and look you straight in the eye. "Closest I come to getting the two of them was for flying them hawks at game outa season. They're always at it."

"By them, you mean Anson and the girl?" I asked.

"Both of 'em. She's as bad as he is."

"Did you get a conviction?"

He put his fingers in the top gap of his shirt and scratched in one spot for a long time.

"Without another witness, it's their word against mine. You take a Metcalf into court and you damn near have to have it on him cold. They ain't well liked but you might say they're well thought of."

"So—you didn't make the arrest."

"I hate to shoot a man's dog on his own property and it about amounts to that, goin' up there with that black dog of his."

"You haven't been to the house?"

"I been there but I stayed in my car." He waited for me to make something of it. When I didn't, he went on.

"They say he raises rabbits for his hawks to kill. I couldn't say, but one day I seen him up on Sleepy Creek Mountain with a big White Rock rooster—probably tyin' it out for his hawks to slaughter."

"The reason I ask about those hawks—did you ever see any sign of an eagle near their place?"

He shrugged and got off the desk. "We see eagles every now and then. Specially at this time of year."

"I saw an eagle from the Sleepy Creek fire tower Saturday," I said.

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"It landed near the Metcalf place."

He squinted at me a little harder. "What did you say your name was?"

"Charles Gratton."

"You the fellow Red had up in the tower?"

I said I was.

"Someone called and asked me who you were and I couldn't remember what your name was." He was grinning his empty grin again.

"Who was it asked you?" I almost didn't recognize my voice.

"I don't know. I could hardly hear him on the telephone. Must of been a bad connection."

"When did he call?" I asked.

"Sunday afternoon. But he wanted to know about who was up there Saturday."

"You said you didn't know?"

"That's right. I couldn't think of your name. I told him all I knew was you were somebody down here from New York takin' pictures. A guy with a camera. He said that would help."

I walked through the courthouse gate and moved along the sidewalk, aware only of leaves loosened by the wind coming down around me. No, he hadn't said who I was. Just a guy with a camera. *That would help.* I buttoned my tweed jacket and walked a little faster.

Which of the calls had been made first? Probably the one to me in the tower. That had drawn a blank. Then this one got him the news I was a photographer from New York. The next call got him my name and Yale Club address. What would the next move get? I noticed I was passing the bus station. I turned in.

In the phone booth I lifted the receiver.

"Operator, were you on duty yesterday afternoon?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know the operator who was?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. She'll come on this evening."

"What time?"

"Six o'clock."

"Where is the exchange?"

"The Telephone Building is on Washington Street, sir."

I thanked her and she giggled. I think she thought I was trying to make a date.

I went back to my room, threw my coat onto a chair and lay on the bed. I couldn't say I was getting anywhere. None of it but my imagination was anything that might not be normal—maybe a little peculiar but normal. None of it but an eagle returning to someone's fist. And those calls.

I felt slightly better back here. I was pretty certain the inquiries hadn't come from the inn. With luck I'd get more about those calls this evening. Lying here on the bed it was nicer thinking about the girl.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

As I WENT DOWN TO DINNER I sensed a vacuum of incredibility in the lounge like a shock wave after an atomic blast. It seemed to radiate from the desk. I looked over and saw what caused it.

A State Police corporal was standing with his thumbs hooked in his jacket pockets, trying to get the old girl back of the desk to tell him something. She appeared so upset about the effect of his presence on the clients that all she would do was whisper. That didn't seem to be getting them anywhere.

I slowed as I came even with them and was just able to make out her words. "Mr. Purcell's room hasn't been used since Saturday." She went on fussing with some papers as if he were a wasp she could ignore and hope it would go away.

The corporal said, "Do you remember any calls for him—and please speak louder."

"His secretary was calling from Washington Sunday evening but we were unable to locate him."

"Any others?"

"If there were other calls they were local. Can't all this be discussed in a more suitable place?"

"Yes ma'am. If you'd like it better we can take you around to the courthouse." He wrote several lines in his notebook and then closed it with the deliberate motion they use when they've given you a summons. Then he settled his hat more firmly on his head. "Right now I want to see the room."

There was an awkward silence while the clerk rang for a boy. When he came she gave him a key and the corporal followed him upstairs. I went into the dining room.

After dinner I stopped at the desk.

"Will you please see if I have any mail?"

I could tell the clerk had reached the stage where, instead of wanting to ignore it, she was in need of a listener. I gave her one.

"Nothing wrong with any of the guests, I hope?"

"It's terrible." Her eyebrows knotted into her forehead and her mouth got thinner. "The State Police have found Mr. Purcell's car in the river. I'm afraid something ghastly must have happened."

"Who's Mr. Purcell?" I asked.

"A gentleman from Washington, D.C. who came here Saturday."

"When did he check out?"

"That's the frightening part. He didn't." She pressed her hand up where her bosom used to be. "He registered here at noon and took luncheon in the dining room. He walked out about the middle of

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the afternoon and that's the last he's been seen."

"You're sure he hasn't been back unnoticed?"

She fluttered the eyelids. "Mr. Purcell wasn't the type of man to pass unnoticed."

"Something unusual about him?"

"Oh—tall, thin, very distinguished. He wore a neat, gray mustache and he looked quite cosmopolitan. Yes—" she seemed happy with the idea—"that's it."

"What age?"

"Age? I always say age doesn't enter in. It's what one is that counts, don't you think?"

"Was he about my age?"

"My dear boy—he was an older man than you. Fifty-nine or sixty. Very distinguished."

"And no one called him or came to see him?"

"I was telling the policeman there was a long distance call for him Sunday evening but he wasn't here. Those officers make one so nervous. Do you know—I do believe someone called him Saturday soon after lunch. But I don't know who."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"WE DON'T MAKE ANY CALLS HERE at the exchange, sir." The operator at the switchboard pulled a plug. "Number please?"

I waited for a lull and said, "When you can give me a moment—"

She turned as if she was surprised to see me still there.

"I understand you were on duty Sunday afternoon," I said. "Yesterday."

She adjusted the earphone and ran a hand over her crisp, curly hair. "I'm on daytime duty Saturdays and Sundays. Weekdays I work at night."

There was a short spell of activity on the line. She took care of it and turned to me again.

"I was in the Sleepy Creek fire tower yesterday afternoon," I said. "You remember my ringing you about a call you'd put through to me?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I couldn't trace that. Those pay phones down the road are on the same line."

"There was another call made yesterday afternoon—to the conservation officer. Remember it?"

"Yes. I noticed it because it came just after you'd asked me to trace the one to you."

"Why did you associate the two?"

"Well, the conservation officer is tied up with the fire towers."

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She listened for a moment and pulled out a plug. "And I thought the voice was the same."

I moved closer. "Which voice?"

"The person calling. It was a pay call over the same line."

"Any other reason?" I asked.

"The questions he asked." Her face got a little pink. "It's monotonous at the switch and we often listen in."

I hoped it was a habit. "Do you remember any other calls from that line Sunday?"

She almost beat me to it. "After the one to the conservation officer there was another one to the inn. I'm sure it was the same man. It was about the same thing—the Sleepy Creek tower."

"You still couldn't spot this pay station?" I asked.

"No. I'm sorry."

"You were at the switchboard Saturday during the day, you say?"

She nodded.

"Can you remember any calls to the inn?"

"That's pretty hard. There are a lot of them."

"A name might help," I said. "A name like Purcell."

She shook her head.

"A call, perhaps arranging to meet someone somewhere?"

She propped her chin on her hand and twisted her head to look at me. "You're not the man they called, are you?"

"No. Do you remember it?"

"Yes. That call was from a colored man. Wait just a minute."

She pulled out a couple of plugs and let them whip into place among a group sitting upright like cartridges.

"It was a hired man phoning in a message."

I stopped her. "You're certain it wasn't an old colored woman?"

"No. It was a man—he wasn't old, but I could tell he was colored from his voice. He said he was calling for some girl who wanted this man at the inn to meet her up on Spine Rocks instead of coming to the house—something about, so there'd be no trouble. It sounded like a love affair."

"Let's get this." I breathed deep to slow the hammering in my head. "What time was this?"

"I'd just eaten my lunch. It was about one-thirty Saturday afternoon."

"Did this colored man give his name?"

"No. He said he worked on the place—wherever that is."

"Are you sure about those rocks?"

"I know it was Spine Rocks," she laughed. "They're up on Sleepy Creek Mountain."

"When was this man to go there? Did you get that?"

"I don't remember what time. But it was that afternoon—Saturday."

I'd been putting off the next part but it had to be faced. "This

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girl's name—" The State Police were going to come with questions. I didn't want to fix it in her mind and yet I had to know. If it was there, my not asking it wouldn't change it. "Did you get her name?"

She straightened the mouthpiece in front of her. "I'm not too good at remembering names. I think it was something like Dianne or Diana."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TUESDAY MORNING WAS OVERCAST and cold. I hadn't got much sleep last night and the buckwheat cakes and country sausage breakfast did a lot for me. I left the dining room and passed up the log fire in the lounge for the desk and my pal of the lidded eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. Gratton." She seemed to be over her low ebb about Purcell and I hated to bring it up but I wanted news.

"Have the State Police given you anything further?" I tried to be discreet and omit names but it didn't do any good. Her mouth got thinner.

"Nothing, except that his secretary in Washington had no idea why he was here. She had expected him to return Sunday."

"What did he do—professionally?" I asked.

"He was with the government—or so the police tell me." Her lids sagged. "They were here this morning and took his things. Part of the investigation, they say."

"Is there anyone here in the village who could give me some of the local legends, something on the older families around here?"

"Oh—people." She touched my arm. "Our rector. He knows more about the history of Fairfax Springs than any person alive today."

"Where can I find him?"

"The rectory is just next to St. Andrews. Yoke Gairdner has lived here nearly all his life and he simply reeks with history. You'll find him charming."

I got her to direct me to the church and went upstairs for my hat and topcoat.

St. Andrews was a nice ivy-covered stone church that might have been in Buckinghamshire. The rectory beside it was smothered with evergreens that had been set too close to it and the ivy was crawling over from the adjoining church. I went onto the porch and pressed the bell under the nameplate: L. YOKE GAIRDNER. The L must have been for something horrible.

I pushed it again and waited. I thought I heard voices around back. Another push got me nothing so I stepped off the porch and walked around the side of the house.

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There was a woman with red-brown hair and frameless glasses standing on the back porch.

"I'm looking for Reverend Gairdner," I said.

"He'll be out in a moment," she said and went into the house and closed the door.

I stood there and wondered which door he'd come from. I bet on the kitchen.

He came out of the garage looking like an ecclesiastical Falstaff in a short black coat, black bib vest, clergyman's collar and well-patched hip boots run up as far as they would go under the round paunch. On the other end he was wearing a waterproof angler's hat that drooped. He took two steps into the yard and stood there, beaming at me with a nine-foot fly rod in one hand and a creel cradled under his left arm. The tightly booted legs under the round belly gave the effect of a turnip with two slender roots.

I started to speak but he was too eager for that.

"Let me show you a fine mess of bass, my friend." He came over with quick short steps and stuck the offensive smelling creel into my face. "Nice, eh? Here's one that will go twelve inches and here—look at this fellow. And this." He was laying them on the walk. "This one looks a little short but he was a full nine inches when I took him from the water. Nothing like October bass fishing."

I said probably not.

He put the fish back into the creel, holding each one up with his fingers hooked through the gills, and then shook hands with me. "Now what was your name, sir? And where are you from?"

I told him.

He was in his early seventies, a big man with a rugged face and gray brows meeting at the top of a large blade nose and overhanging the intensely blue eyes. There were heavy folds under the eyes that didn't, on him, seem so much bags as excess skin. The mouth was large and rather earthy and I don't think I've ever seen bigger ears on a human. The fore-and-aft collar wasn't clean and there was evidence of former meals on the black vest but, after all, he'd been fishing.

"So you're down from New York. You have a fine rector at St. Thomas." He set his rod in a corner of the porch and the house and jerked open the door with a gesture. "Come in. You must join me at my bass breakfast."

"Thanks, I've just eaten. But if you'll let me talk to you while you eat—"

"No, no. You'll join me."

We stepped into the kitchen and he introduced me to his wife, handing her the creel. "Come into my study and sit down while I wash up. I'll be back shortly."

A china clock on the mantel kept making small internal sounds

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as if it was clearing its throat to strike but all it did was go on ticking—a shade too fast, I thought—as if it had spent a lifetime trying to keep up with Yoke Gairdner.

I could hear him walking around on the floor above, his heavy steps jarring the house. Then he came thumping down some stairs and he was back.

I couldn't see that he'd changed his outfit except to take off the boots and his hat. He had a yellowish bald head with pores like a Longchamps grapefruit. He threw himself onto a couch and rubbed his hands along his thighs.

"And now, Mr. Gratton, what did you want to see me about?"

"Do you know the Metcalf place up on Third Hill?" I said, taking the rocker facing him.

"Know it? I would say I do." He closed his eyes and dragged his hand down over his face. It left the heavy eyebrows bristling. "I've spent many a pleasant day there when I was a boy."

"What can you tell me about Anson Metcalf?" I asked.

"Took the better part of a day in a horse and buggy. Anson, you say?" He raised his eyes and gave his best cloister smile to the ceiling. "A personality, if I ever knew one. A gentleman, a born raconteur—he could strum a banjo and imitate his colored boys to a turn. Sitting in the next room listening, you'd swear he was a cornfield darky. He built and owned the Metcalf House—the most fashionable resort here at the Springs and up to the time it burned in nineteen two it earned him quite a penny. By the time he died he had acquired much of this world's goods. Drove the finest pair of bays in the county. The Metcalfs have always been quality."

"Just a moment," I said when he took a breath, "the one I mean isn't dead."

"Oh, Young Anson. I'm speaking of his grandfather. Different character there entirely. Last of the Metcalf line—the seed's run out." He poked a finger into his ear and bored, tilting his head and squinting.

"What do you know about him?"

"Mainly his background. No one sees much of Young Anson now. Lives up there on the mountain with his hawks."

"I'd be interested in hearing about him," I said.

He examined me from under one cocked, gray eyebrow. "Are you a falconer?"

"No, but I'm interested in falcons—from a photographer's point of view. I was up there yesterday and got some pictures of the peregrine."

"You got to see Young Anson?" From the way he said it, it sounded as though Anson was something kept in a bottle of preservative.

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"No. He sent word to the effect that he was indisposed."

"Well, I wondered." Gairdner was studying the palm of his hand. "But that is typical."

"What makes him that way?" I asked.

"Who can say? Heredity, environment, some freak combination of genes. His father died when he was four or five and his grandfather three years later. He was raised by his mother. I can still see Anson's mother Belle as a girl—a wild sort of beauty—riding astride when other women rode sidesaddle. She was quite young and pretty when she was widowed but, after the grandfather died, she and the boy stayed on up there at the old home place. It was a lonely life for Young Anson—no other youngsters—just his mother and the colored servants. He was rather odd from the start. Possibly it was Belle's fault. She doted on the boy and he worshipped her."

"What about his sister, Dana?" I interrupted.

"That's his half sister. Anson's mother married a second time."

I don't know why but I was somehow glad to hear that.

He rubbed his eyes. "I happened to be involved with the family at the time. Belle came to me about the boy when he was just a child. He was showing introvertive tendencies even then—very bright but withdrawn. Spent far too much time among the old books up there. She worried about his not having the normal interests of a boy that age. Sending him to school from there was unfeasible in those days, difficult transportation, so I agreed to supervise his education. I couldn't give him the attention of a full-time tutor but I paid weekly visits and did the best I could. He was a brilliant lad—especially in the classics. Loved medieval literature. We got on well enough but, do you know, I think the boy always resented my being there—as a man, I mean. Good heavens, I was fifteen years older than his mother and I'd known her as a little girl. But he resented it."

Mrs. Gairdner came to the study door. I still got the impression she was going to yawn. "Bring Mr. Gratton to the dining room, Yoke. Your bass are ready."

I could smell them as he led the way. His wife said she wasn't joining us. I saw that she had put herself to a lot of trouble with the meal but I can't go fried fish. We sat down and after he asked a blessing, quoting Henry Van Dyke and Izaak Walton, I sat there and watched him eat bass, biscuits and honey and fried eggs.

It would have been useless to attempt conversation while he ate so I had just marked time. It hadn't taken long.

Now he pushed his chair sideways and slapped his belly three

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times, slowly. It made three solid sounds. "As long as we're comfortable, we may as well remain where we are. Light up." He tossed a tobacco pouch onto the table.

"Thanks. I'll have one of my cigarettes. Join me?" I held out the pack.

He waved it away. "No smoke for a man." He had dug a short pipe from his pocket and was packing tobacco into it, spilling shreds onto the table cloth. To stay sweet, a pipe needs loving care. This one hadn't had it.

"I'd appreciate it," I said, "if you'd tell me more about Anson Metcalf."

"There came a time when I felt Anson had to face reality." He was talking with his pipe clamped in his teeth. "At my insistence Belle sent him to a boy's preparatory school. After two years he came home and refused to go on to college. In a way it was unfortunate he had his grandfather's estate to cushion him. If he'd had to get out and forage for himself it might have made a man of him. As it was, he avoided further contact with people and buried himself up there on the mountain with Belle and his hawks."

"The hawks are an unusual angle," I said as casually as I could. "How did he get started with them?"

"As a youngster he was interested in birds. The hawk migrations fascinated him—you probably don't realize that this section is famous for its hawk flights. There were several volumes on falconry in his grandfather's library. With his interest in books and his love of birds it would seem to follow naturally that he should devour them. Personally, I have another theory."

"Young Anson has always been anti-modern. As he grew older, and especially after his return from boarding school, he came to hate the world and people. A desire for medieval isolation seemed to obsess him. Back there in that old house it wasn't a difficult illusion to evoke. As you know, falconry is cruel and bloody, the antithesis of civilized existence. To a sick, frustrated soul it was a way to relieve the tensions. Falconry was Anson's antidote, his way of fighting back."

"He's actually abnormal?" I asked.

"Just what is normal?" He stared at me. "Is Anson Metcalf's persecution syndrome so rare?" He re-fired his pipe.

"Tell me about the girl, Dana," I said without answering his question.

He looked at me over the flame as it bobbed up and down into the pipe bowl and then he blew it out.

"That was hard on Anson," he said as he examined the match.

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I waited.

"Anson was seventeen when his mother met Harrison. Belle told me about it. She and Young Anson were up on the Spine Rocks—you wouldn't know where they are—when this very handsome man appeared. He was out from Washington on a weekend ramble in the fall color. They chatted. He was smart, charming; she was not yet thirty-nine and still beautiful. In short, he captivated her. That was in the autumn. I married them the following April. Dana was born a year later."

"You might expect a baby sister to mellow the young neurotic," I said. "Did it?"

"The boy had always been devoted to his mother. When she remarried he resented it though she tried not to let him feel discarded. Nevertheless, he refused to go to Washington to live with Belle and his step-father, insisting on staying at the Metcalf place with Cricket, a reliable old family servant. He went to Washington just once, when he took Cricket to be with Belle when Dana was born. Belle died in childbirth. They were able to save the baby."

He took a deep pull on his pipe but it was dead. "Picture, if you can, this bitter boy. The one thing he had ever loved—his mother—gone. First, taken from him by this tall stranger and now irrevocably lost. I feared he would resent the infant, feeling she had been the cause of Belle's death but he didn't. As soon as it was possible, he and Cricket brought the little thing back home to raise and—would you believe it—Anson seemed to transfer his affections to the child, partly I suppose because she was all he had left of his mother. There Dana was raised, up on that wild mountain by her half brother Anson and old Cricket.

"So the girl's name is Dana Harrison," I said.

"No," he said, stretching, "Harrison is her father's first name. She is Dana Purcell."

It almost jolted me off my chair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MY MIND WAS CHEWING at something. *Dana Purcell Harrison*—"Harrison Dana Purcell?" I said. "Is that it? The NATO deputy?"

He nodded. "Made a career of the diplomatic service," he said. "He was here to see me last spring—about Dana. After Belle's death he tried to keep in touch with the baby—money, birthday presents, that sort of thing. You may ask why he didn't raise the child. Remember, there he was, alone, stunned by the loss of his wife. Rather than put the baby with strangers it seemed logical that

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she should be raised on the Metcalf place—you know, family servants, the half-brother. Or so Harrison thought. He didn't know his stepson. Harrison was on a tour of foreign duty and during the war lost touch. He had remarried but it wound up in divorce. All this swept him further from his daughter."

His chair creaked as he tilted back.

"I hadn't seen him since the day I read Belle's funeral service. When he turned up here last spring the years had left their mark on him. Not that he still wasn't straight as a ramrod, just as suave, but now his hair was snowy white." He ran his hand over his own smooth pate. "Harrison had always been a bit vain, I thought. It is one of those personal opinions you have and keep to yourself, like your own idea of Bach. Be that as it may, he had received this letter from his daughter that stirred up old emotions. Dana had come across his picture in a magazine and from the middle and last names realized it must be her father. Anson always vehemently refused to discuss her father with her but, being the age when a young girl feels the need of family stability and finding the prospect of having such a colorful father as Harrison Dana Purcell romantic, she wrote him through the State Department. Her letter delighted him and as soon as he got back to the States he looked her up."

"That must have been a rather touching thing," I said.

"Unfortunately it was less than happy," He knocked his dead pipe into his coffee dregs. "Harrisson came directly here from the Metcalf place. He had been shocked, after his chic diplomatic set to find his daughter 'an untamed barbarian' as he put it. With his deep feeling of the right thing to do, he was consumed with a tardy sense of parental responsibility for this girl. 'There is so much, Yoke,' he said, 'I can and must do for her. Cultural advantages she has missed. I'll show her the world and, above all, get her out of that mouldering place back there in the woods.' He had insisted that she leave with him at once. For the girl it was confusing—she wanted to be with her newly found father and at the same time couldn't face giving up the life she loved, the place that meant home. Harrison wouldn't admit it, but naturally Dana has a certain affection for Anson, queer as he is. As for Anson—there'd been a scene. He ordered Harrison off the place under threat of turning loose that black beast he keeps up there like a dragon. Harrison left, stating that he would be back for Dana in October. He left Anson seething, Dana in tears, and he was quite upset himself when he arrived

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here. I advised him to proceed cautiously but he was determined. He had to be in Europe this summer but will return this fall. He is coming for her and threatens to resort to law if necessary."

"The courts would back him up," I said.

"Yes, but don't lose sight of the human factor. Harrison made me promise to talk to Dana and Anson. I told him I hadn't seen her since I persuaded Anson to send Dana to St. Hilda's Hall. She stuck it out for three semesters but she'd been miserably unhappy. After Harrison had gone I tried to fulfill my promise. It was no good. Young Anson refused to see me or let me talk to Dana. He's savagely jealous of her. I suppose it follows that, having lost his mother to Harrison, he feels the world is again about to take the only thing he loves. During the summer I've exchanged a letter or two with Harrison at which time he said he had written to Dana telling her when to expect him but had had no replies. He suspects that Anson intercepts his letters to her." He sighed. "I want to help him but I may as well confess there was a time I didn't."

"What do you mean?"

He glanced toward the kitchen door. "I was in love with Belle before Harrison came along. She never knew it."

I stood up from the table. "A man named Purcell registered at the inn last Saturday."

His head came around and the eyebrows lifted. "Harrison?"

"I don't know."

"Tall, high forehead with abundant hair? A bit dramatic looking, no hat — probably good tweeds?"

"I can't say I've seen him. In fact no one seems to have—since shortly after he checked in."

"If it's Harrison he'd almost certainly have come to see—" Both his hands came around and hit the table with a crash. "What did you say?"

"The State Police found his car in the Potomac River yesterday. Up to the time I left the inn, they hadn't found him."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN I GOT BACK they still hadn't. I asked my pal behind the desk to let me see Purcell's registration card. The initials were definitely H. D.

Up in my room after lunch, the next move seemed too easy. Get in touch with the colored hired man and verify the message he'd been given. I wouldn't admit it to myself, but all along it had been a grating note. Not that it had to be anything off-color, arranging to meet an older man in a se-

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cluded place, but she was a naive young thing and now I knew he was her father, I felt better—up to a certain part. That part I didn't like.

I picked up my phone and asked for the post office.

When they answered I asked if mail went out of their office for the Metcalfs up on Third Hill. The man didn't know the name but he said the RFD in that area came from an office on the other side of the ridge.

I decided the idea was no good anyway. A hired man wouldn't necessarily live on the place. While I had the phone in my hands I tried something else.

"Information? Does Anson Metcalf have a phone?"

There was a pause, then:

"No, sir. There is no phone listed under that name."

"You're sure? That's not in town. It's on Third Hill Mountain."

"I've heard of him, sir, but there is no telephone listed."

I put the phone in its cradle and wondered what I was going to do next.

I told myself there was Law, capital L, to take care of this thing. So far, they'd found Harrison Purcell's car. I ought to go to them. I could see myself telling a State Police corporal about the thing that was bothering me—a man I'd seen on Spine Rocks. Trying to identify someone I'd never seen less than a mile away. And anyway, that was Saturday. They didn't find the car till Monday—nowhere near the rocks.

I stopped stalling and faced it. I didn't want the State Police up there working on that girl.

I changed into slacks and a sweater and put on my bush jacket. I wasn't sure about the Leica. Taking it yesterday had been like tying a label on myself. I decided it woudn't hurt to have it along if I wanted to be the conversational camera amateur for anyone else. I slung it around my neck, picked up my soft hat from the dresser and went downstairs.

Outside, it was still cold and cloudy. I climbed in the Jaguar and pulled on a pair of pigskin gloves, snapping the straps at my wrists. It took a while for the engine to warm up but by the time I was headed down the valley it was making a sound like a contented pine tree in a breeze.

Near the crossroads I pulled to a stop by a big shag-bark hickory on the edge of a field where a man in an old coat and overalls was sitting, doubled over, on a pile of fodder husking corn.

I climmed out and stepped across a ditch to the fence. He turned to one side and spit at the ground, making a ducking motion with his head like a chicken pecking grain. He didn't nod or acknowledge me but went on husking corn.

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When I spoke, I got the idea he was a little disappointed as if I had muffed the punch line but I went on.

"Do you mind if I take a picture of your corn field? Those shocks make a nice pattern."

He looked me over and seemed to decide I wasn't kidding him. "Go ahead. Never had no time to fool with pictures, myself. Always had somethin' more important to git done."

He was one of those weathered, ageless men.

I went through the routine of focussing and shooting without actually tripping the shutter but it seemed to convince him. After I'd closed the carrying case I leaned on his fence and confided that I'd always thought farming would be interesting.

We talked about the chance of rain or whether it would be snow. He said the corn wasn't as good as it might be but he guessed it didn't do any good to complain. Things would be the way they'd be and all a man could do was do his part. If more people did that there'd be a lot more work done in this world.

After we got that off our chests I said, "Yesterday, while I was taking some pictures up on Third Hill Mountain, I met a colored man who said the people he worked for kept falcons. After I left him I wished I'd asked where the place was. I'd like to get some shots of a falcon. Do you know where I could find him?"

"I'd like to get a shot at their damned hawk but it won't be with no camera." He slammed an ear of corn onto the pile beside him.

"You know the man I mean?"

"Anson Metcalf's who has them hawks."

"Do you know the help up there?" I asked.

"Ought to," he grunted. "Lived in this valley all my life."

"What about the colored man they have?"

"You been talkin' to their old nigger woman Cricket."

"No," I said, "it was a colored man. Metcalf sounds like the name he mentioned. He said he was a hired man on the place."

He examined the unhusked ear in his hand. "Someone's been beeessin' you, Mister. There ain't been any hands hired on that place since Anson Metcalf took over. Or any work done, neither. They used to be good fields up there that's growed to woods now. Anything gits done there is done by old Cricket an' she's past amountin' to anything." He ripped the husk from the ear of corn. It made a sound like wrapping paper.

Up on Third Hill at the old brick gate post I pulled to the side of the paved road without blocking Mr. Anson Metcalf's entrance. I decided to leave the

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Leica in the car. I locked it in the rear compartment with my other accoutrement and started out the lane.

I wished I didn't have to go on foot but the Englishmen who build Jaguars never see roads like this. I found a nice thick section of a branch that had blown out of a tree, lying in the ditch. I picked it up and tested it but it was rotten. Further on I found one that would beat a man's brain out. I hoped it would work on Dobermans.

There's something about this time of year even low-moving clouds and cold wind can't spoil. I think it's the color and the way you're suspended in it that does things to you. Moving along that lane with yellow and red leaves showering down like an endless drift of tree petals, I had to tell myself why I was doing this thing—walking an old mountain road with a club in my hand. This was a world with a glow that didn't need sunlight to make it golden. It all became kind of mixed up with eyes and hair the color of some of these tan leaves. Then the sound got through to me and I realized I must have been hearing it for some time. Just to be on the safe side, I stepped behind a tree trunk, though I was certain it would be Dana even before the car came around the turn of the lane.

It was an oldish car that sagged considerably on the driver's side and there was a fresh spattering of water from the deep ruts in the lane darkening the coat of mud along its flanks. I was on the driver's side of the road but I couldn't see the man behind the wheel till he came even with me, though from the beating the springs were taking I could tell he had a lot of weight to him. Then I saw the drooping cloth hat, the shaggy brows and the large blade nose. The slightly soiled parson's collar looked too tight and the massive face was the deep, dull red of a setting sun on a hazy day. L. Yoke Gairdner wasn't smiling.

Just when I thought he was going to pass without seeing me, his big head came around and the gray brows pulled together in a frown. He slammed on the brakes, the car slithered through a puddle and the engine went dead with a gurgle that sounded like a sigh of relief.

The Reverend Gairdner went through the motions of showing his teeth but it was a bit too stiff. As I stepped to the side of his car I saw him glance at the club in my hand. I tried to lean on it like a walking stick but it wouldn't reach the ground and I ended up holding it in the crook of my arm like a British colonel's baton.

"Mr. Gratton, we meet again."

"You've been talking to Anson

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Metcalf, I suppose." I didn't think it worth while making it a question.

"I wouldn't say I've been talking to him."

"Dana, then."

"I haven't laid eyes on her."

He pinned me with his glare as if he dared me to question it. I let it ride and listened to his breath hissing through his nostrils.

"I don't deny having seen Anson," he started digging at his ear, "but if you can in any way construe our encounter as conversational, you're far from accurate and I'd advise you to keep away from him."

"Just why?"

"He's in one of his less civilized moods, if he was ever civilized. I wouldn't answer for what he or that black monster of his might do to you, a stranger."

"What did he do to you?"

He examined the steering wheel as if he wanted to tear it out and his face got red again, which was the first I'd noticed that his color must have subsided. "Anson ordered me off the place—permanently. Me," he jerked his head back and whipped his voice into a righteous quaver, "an old friend, an intimate of the family. A confidant of his mother Belle before he was conceived and brought forth into this world." It was a good job that would have carried very nicely from the pulpit of St. Andrews. Out here, it rang a little flat.

"Do you mind, Mr. Gairdner, telling me what you wanted to see Anson about. Enough to drive up here to his house?"

"In the first place, I didn't get so far as the house. I encountered Anson in this lane, headed this direction with that dog. Secondly, I imagine the circumstances that impelled my coming up are the same as those that brought you."

"Then you think there's a connection between Anson and Harrison Purcell's disappearance," I said.

"I don't care to put it quite that way." Yoke Gairdner's voice was steadier now but his gaze was fixed a foot behind my head like a man on TV reading script posted behind the cameras. "But Harrison was my friend. Greater love hath no man—" He let it coast.

"Did you get to make that point? With Anson, I mean?"

"I got to make no point, sir. Young Anson is in no mood for reasoning. I tell you, the man is dangerous." He leaned to the opposite side and opened the door. "Come around and get in. Let me carry you back to town."

"Thanks, my car's out at the entrance. And, anyway, I'm going in to see young Anson, myself."

"It would be a great mistake,

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Mr. Gratton. You must believe me." He pressed the starter. "Come. I'll drive you back to your car."

"No thanks, I'll walk back—after I'm through. Tell me one thing, Mr. Gairdner. What's the name of their colored man on the place? The hired hand."

He examined me hostilely. "They have no hired man, so far as I am aware." He seemed a little bothered that there was anything he wasn't sure of. "Of course not. There's been no menial of any description up here for years—except old Cricket. I think you can take my word for that. Is it important?"

"No. I just wanted your opinion." I stepped back to wait for him to drive off.

"You're not coming with me?" he demanded.

"No. No, I'm not coming with you."

"The stupidity of man who heareth not the warning." He made a snorting sound and let his clutch in. It sent the car forward with a groaning jerk that threw a wake of muddy water onto my shoes. Yoke Gairdner was a much more appealing person with a full belly, sitting in his own dining room.

As I walked on in the direction of the house, I examined the fresh tracks from Gairdner's tires. They were definitely not a diamond pattern.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN I CAME TO THE OLD ORCHARD it was bleak and empty. I hadn't realized how much I'd been hoping she'd be there.

I was still carrying the club but I had wandered into the yard as if I had never heard of Dobermans. Nothing had ground my leg up as yet so if he was around he hadn't seen me. I walked past the boxwood with its rustling blue-green mass of foliage to the old door under the fanlight. I lifted the knocker, let it drop and listened to the wind grieving through the trees. The leaves seemed to have thinned since yesterday.

At the risk of bringing the dog around the house I used the knocker again, longer and louder. When the door opened, it was Cricket—her old eyes fixed beyond me like two milky opals.

"I was here yesterday, Cricket. Is Miss Dana home?"

"No, suh. She ain't."

"Would you mind if I waited?" I thought the door started to close and I added—"inside? Mr. Metcalf's dog—"

There was a pause, then she moved back, pulling the door wider. "Dat Luger, don' mess with him." It wasn't cordial—not even advice. More like a warning to a tramp.

I tossed my piece of branch

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away and stepped past her. She closed the door behind me.

We were in a center hall with stairs going up along the right wall. Not much light leaked through the fanlight but it didn't bother Cricket. She was moving toward a doorway on the left, her elbows close in, her thin simian hands thrown out like a gesture of astonishment. I saw her feel for the opening.

She led me into a low-ceilinged room done in some gloomy panelling like cherry. There were no curtains at the windows and the accumulation of stuff in the room seemed to have grown inward with a feeling that the walls were pressing in. Part of it was the cluttered condition of the book shelves. Books lined the wall to my right, broken only by a fireplace, and magazines and books spilled out onto tables and window sills and the floor.

Cricket moved among the mess as if she knew it by heart, crossing to the fireplace. I picked my way after her.

There was a feeble fire that fell apart when she poked it. She bent painfully toward the wood basket.

"Here, let me do that." I wasn't sure she liked it, but I laid a couple of heavy pieces on the andirons. "Must keep someone busy cutting all this wood," I said.

"We gets the wood hauled in ready-cut."

"I suppose you have enough work to keep the outside man busy without sawing wood."

I watched the shriveled face. If there was any change I didn't see it.

"Time was when there was plenty yard servants on the place. They's all so trashy Mister Anson say he rather not be pestered."

"Don't you ever have a hired man come work by the day?" I tried to sound mildly interested.

She stiffened. "If Mister Anson don't have no man," she said loyally, "it because he don't want none."

She moved toward the door and hesitated. I got the feeling she wanted to walk out on me but wasn't sure I could be trusted.

"Is Mr. Anson home?" I asked.

She took time to think it over and then seemed to be talking more to herself than to me. "He must gone off again after Miss Dana."

I wondered if Yoke Gairdner had really seen Anson or, if he had, why he was so anxious for me to keep away from him.

"Where is Miss Dana?"

I could see her going through some kind of personal agony. It was barely possible to make out what she was saying and I honestly don't believe that for her, at this moment, I was there.

"My little girl, she don't eat nor sleep right. I hear her prowlin' round the house at night."

"You think she's ill?" I asked

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softly, trying not to break the spell.

"Won't take no medicine." The blind old face broke up and she worried the apron with her hands. "All I'se good for is take care my folks. When I cain't do nuthin' for them it hurt in here." She pressed a fist against the bony chest and went out the door. I could hear her mumbling and a floor board creaked as she shuffled along the hall.

The steps died away in slow cadence but they left an uneasy gnawing in my mind. Was there something wrong about Dana? How well could you know a girl you've seen for, at the most, not over an hour and a half? There was something about her, you couldn't be near her and miss it. I couldn't flatter myself it was my dazzling personality—most of the time she had kept her eyes on the hawk. How much of it was the odd life she led and how much this Anson's influence—or the half of their bloodlines they shared?

I studied a small painting in a gold frame over the fireplace. It was a blonde young woman in riding clothes, done in a hard, primitive style but it had a certain charm. It obviously wasn't Dana—this girl didn't have Dana's dreamy, pale hazel eyes. These eyes were blue and they weren't hidden by long lashes. Then, too, this face wasn't that odd combination like Dana's—like a broad face corrected to finer features. This girl was attractive but in an entirely different manner, at least, if the artist had caught her character. There was an incongruous note, a cameo brooch in her stock which he had handled with a good bit of detail as if it had been a personal tag or favorite possession. Below the painting, lying on the mantel, was a recent Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue looking oddly as if it belonged.

The flames were licking up around the dry wood now. After my walk in the cold air, the heat felt good. I turned my back to the fireplace and looked around me.

The room might have been made into something nice but it would take a lot of changing. I don't know what gave the room its overloaded air unless it was the books. Or the framed photographs that seemed to be everywhere.

All of them were of a woman with light hair and rather striking eyes, the woman in the painting over the mantel. Her face was pretty enough when you could lose sight of the out-of-date hairdo. The thing that interested me was the boy who was in almost every picture.

In the earlier shots, dated by the clothes, he was just a little boy holding her hand. One of them was taken with a squarish looking old man in a Panama hat and I wondered if he was the

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grandfather Anson. As the woman's fashions changed, the boy showed first as a thin dark-eyed child all knees and wrists, coming along the years to a bony adolescent with an aquiline nose and dark mystic eyes under an uncombed mass of black hair, long over the ears and back of neck. In the picture where he was the oldest, he had one arm around the woman's shoulder and looked like something that hadn't quite feathered out. This would be Young Anson and his mother Belle.

It came as a shock to find he was so frail and watered-down. I had visualized something big, rugged—maybe just as feverish but more aggressive in a beefy way. I suppose it was the idea of the hawks and the Doberman. I should have thought of it—you don't have to be big to fly a hawk. All you need is a stomach for cruelty. The rest of it would still hold, only being weak you'd be more dangerous.

There's a lot you can learn about a person from the things they have around them. I wondered if there was a chance of seeing upstairs. With both Anson and Dana away I couldn't ask for a better break.

I moved over to the hall door and listened. I think Cricket was doing something to the kitchen stove, maybe poking out some ashes. There was no other sound but the wind worrying the leaves in the trees. I crossed to the stairs and started up.

When I got to the top there was a landing with doors on right and left. A third door, facing the head of the stairs, led to the upper rear porch for I could see through small panes set in the upper half.

I listened again but the upstairs had that stale stillness of old houses whose windows are seldom raised. Not even the rustling of the leaves reached here. I could see a hallway leading forward with the stair well to the left and a window at the front.

I turned and tried the door beside me on the right of the landing. It opened on a room, dark and musty smelling. At first I thought, from the drawn blinds, that someone must be sleeping there. Then I saw the bed, bare of mattress and bedclothes—the general disorder. Just a collecting place for old plunder. I pulled the door to, quietly.

The opposite door was locked. I moved along the hall toward the front of the house.

There were two more doors, one on either side, and a closed staircase over the stair well that would go to the attic. The door on my right was ajar. I waited to see if there was any sound behind it but it might as well have been to a mausoleum. When I pushed it open and stepped in I knew I was standing in Anson Metcalf's room.

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There was a tall four-poster bed facing me, and a fireplace that would be above the library fireplace downstairs. The fire had burned out but there was that red glow beneath gray ash, like a cigarette that needs an ash tray. The walls were a dark blue-gray in some sort of water paint over peeling plaster, and again there were no curtains at the windows. What came at you, after you got the layout of the place, were his damned, peering, ratty-looking hawks. They were everywhere—staring from the top of the chest of drawers, from the mantelpiece, from the floor in the corners.

I've never been able to understand a mind that wanted to surround itself with stuffed remains of birds and game. I suppose, having slaughtered them, some people feel so happy about it they want to keep some evidence around to gloat over. But I somehow knew this was different. These weren't hawks that he had killed. These hawks had done his killing for him. Each one had had a name, comparable to Butcher Boy; each one had been fondled, trained, made to go out on command and slay. These were his little pals and, now that they were dead, he had them all around him, where he slept, like a bunch of mummies in a museum. I saw that each had his bells and thongs attached to the legs—"jesses", Dana called them.

There was a low platform beside Anson's bed with a padded tick, like the things dogs sleep on. Luger's couch. I couldn't see much else in the room for thinking of the hawks. I imagined I could smell them. As I turned to go I noticed a door to the left of the fireplace.

I remembered the locked room at the rear of the hall. Unless there was a closet or a dressing room between, this should lead to that same room.

I walked over and twisted the knob. It came open with no effort.

I guess I had, in the back of my mind, been thinking all this time about Dana and where she might be. The moment I opened the door I felt that this was her room. The crisp starched curtains at the windows at my left, the quilt on the bed between them, the color of the rag rugs on the broad floor boards. It was all so definitely a girl's room, intimate and frilly. I would have said, almost too frilly. It took me a moment to realize that it was empty.

The place looked lived-in but at the same time oddly stiff. I suppose girls are neater than men, but, if I had thought of it before, I wouldn't have thought of Dana's room looking quite like this. There was a blue taffeta dressing robe on the foot of the old maple bed but it was carefully folded, and the quilt and sheet were meticulously turned down as in readiness

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for tonight. There were slippers, small and pathetically lonesome looking on this side of the bed. There was a washstand in one corner with a nice blue and white bowl and pitcher full of water and a fresh bar of soap in the dish.

I don't suppose it is considered proper to go poking around a girl's bedroom, with or without the lady present, but there was something annoying about Dana's room opening off Anson's the way it did—and that hall door being locked. I walked over to see if I had been mistaken. I hadn't.

There were well-rubbed riding boots standing at one side of the hearth and I saw that the unlit fire was newly laid. Dana hadn't mentioned riding but her crop was lying on the mantel beneath —and it seemed an odd place to keep them—a bridle and curb bit hanging on the chimney wall.

I examined the boots again. They looked rather too small for a girl as tall as Dana. Quite possibly she had exceptionally small feet. Still, it began to seem too important.

I stopped trying to pretend. After all, if I had any decent principles I wouldn't have come in here. I walked around to the far side of the bed. There were two narrow doors with wrought-iron hinges, flanking a marble-topped dresser.

I opened the one on the left.

The window beside me gave enough light to see the things hanging on the rack inside. They didn't look like the kind of clothes Dana had worn yesterday.

I closed the closet door and looked at the dresser. It had a few things out on top—an old-fashioned silver comb and brush, a hand mirror and one of those lustre china replicas of a high ladies' shoe with a pin-cushion top. There was a pressed glass box that was transparent. I carefully lifted the lid and took out what was inside, turning to the window.

The cameo head was delicate against the pink ground, a beautiful piece of carving and it would have been outstanding anywhere, even if I hadn't seen it in the gold-framed portrait in the library. I think there is some story about cameos taking on a warmth of color when worn against the body of a woman. The one in my hand was as pale and cold as marble. This room belonged to Anson's mother, Belle.

I laid the brooch back in its glass box without stepping from the end of the dresser. I put the lid in its place but my hand stayed where it was, outstretched above the box. Something to the right of the dresser had moved. It was the other narrow door.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT TOOK LONGER SWINGING OPEN than I had any way of knowing. My hand was still extended over the dresser. For a second after the door stopped moving there was only the empty frame. Then Cricket stepped through.

She stood, turning her head from side to side, as if she could get my scent.

"Who in here?"

I didn't stir.

Slowly she started coming toward me, her groping hands exploring the space ahead of her like some insect with inquisitive antennae.

I was cornered between the end of the dresser and the window with Cricket moving into the narrow space formed by the dresser and the bed. I thought of the closet beside me but she would hear me open the door. I froze and waited.

There was something deliberate about the way she came, as if she had some means of knowing I was there but wanted to prolong my horror of those reaching fingers.

She was only a few feet away now, her face pointing toward me, one hand with wide-spread fingers held in front of her, the other feeling along the top of the dresser—When she reached the end of the dresser she was so close I could smell her breath, heavy with the prune-like aroma of snuff. I could see the brown juice in the corners of her mouth and her opalescent eyes peering up directly into mine. I was almost certain then that she could see, that her playing blind was a grotesque ruse. I flattened back into the window, making the most of the deep-silled recess, but there was no place to put my legs. Her hands played across the curtains within inches of my face. I stopped breathing and tried to subdue my heart as I watched the pinkish-tan palms make passes back and forth like the hands of a hypnotist.

I had reached the point where I thought I couldn't stand it any longer. She turned and, opening the closet beside her, explored it carefully. Closing it and nearly stepping on my foot, she went back along the bed and the dresser and began circling the rest of the room.

At the doorway to Anson's room she found the door open and stopped, whispering, "Mistuh Anson?"

Getting no answer, she swung around, pulling the door shut. Then she crossed the room again to the little doorway she had come through.

As she disappeared inside and closed it behind her, I wondered how long she had been hiding in that closet and why she was going back. Then I heard her foot-

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steps going down some stairs. It must be a service stairway from the rear of the house.

I got across the room as fast as I could, through the door into Anson's room and out to the hall. Once on the front stairs, I knew I could gain ground on Cricket. I got down to the library and was sitting in front of the fire by the time she groped her way to the library door.

She stood a moment, listening. I stirred the fire for her benefit, rattling the poker against the brass andirons.

She waited, giving me that uneasy impression once again that she could see, then, slowly, she moved back along the hall. The creaky board under her foot was the only sound.

When my breathing slowed a bit I walked closer to the portrait in the frame. It may not be the best way to view a painting but I wasn't studying technique. I wondered how long that room upstairs had been kept that way—like a bouquet of dried flowers under glass — starched curtains, her boots polished, water and soap waiting on the washstand, the bed turned down—ready. How long can you keep up a thing like that? There was more to it than a young boy's yearning for his mother, more than he could have managed alone. It would be Cricket's wrinkled hands that did the work.

Did Cricket believe Belle was still alive, still used those things up there? It would probably only take a voice to make her think it. Not just any voice but the right voice would do.

I moved over to the shelves of books. As far as I could see there wasn't a modern thing in the lot unless you count Galsworthy. There were nice old leather-bound volumes of history and one called THE SUFFOLK PUNCH. I had to look. It was about horses, not a drink.

Down on the lower shelf beside Robert E. Lee's biography, I found what I was looking for—THE GENTLEMAN'S RECREATION: BEING A TREATISE OF HAWKING AND FALCONRY. It was in an old half morocco binding, published in 1868, not a large book but a beauty. There was one called COURSING AND FALCONRY and several others, all on falconry, that looked like items for a collection. I took out a couple and thumbed through them, looking at the old plates.

I carried it to the settee before the fire and, after lighting a cigarette, leafed through the text. It was laced with odd words like *imping* and *hunger trace* and *mutes*. One part stated that "long-winged falcons like the peregrine take their quarry on the wing, flying high and swooping upon their prey, whereas the slower broad-winged hawks and eagles

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fly low and slay by stealth most often on the ground." There was a pleasant little tip on making a hawk *kene* for flight by keeping him awake the night before by the *use of drogges*. It was also suggested that the hawk be made ready for the kill by the offer of a taste of warm blood several hours before being flown. It didn't say what kind of blood.

A sound made me turn around. It was Dana, standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IF I'D BEEN WORRYING about her being just a horsey-looking kid I could have spared myself the trouble. She had the fawn-colored hair swept back but hanging loose today—no particular style and I thought it did something to her face, making it more mature. She wore a dull green turtle neck under the suede vest she'd had on yesterday, and faded jodhpurs. She didn't say anything obvious like "It's you" or "So you're back." She just came over to the fireplace and sat on the far end of the wooden settee, one knee rather tight in the jodhpurs where she had it doubled under her. I sat down again.

I could see a change in her. More sharp-set, to use a phrase from the book I was holding.

"Cricket let me wait," I said. "I've been learning a little about falconry." As I laid the book between us I noticed she was shivering.

She saw me watching her and said, "It's cold outside."

I had a pretty good fire going but she got up and piled on more wood, sending sparks up the chimney. When she came back to the settee she kept her arms wrapped around herself as if she could still be cold with that blaze in front of us.

She let me run on for a while about the house, the room, and then, turning away from the fire and looking me exactly in the eyes, she said, "Who are you?"

"My name's Charles Gratton. People who care to bother call me Grat. As I told you yesterday, I'm here to take some pictures."

"Where do you live?"

It sounded naive. It might be something more. I took a drag on my cigarette.

"I'm not like you, with nice roots in an old homestead. I'm one of those people who move around." I told her a little about the kind of places I've been.

She listened and I thought she seemed slightly more at ease. At least, she wasn't shivering now. I had unfastened my jacket but with my sweater and the overheated room I was nearly steamed.

"You say you may go to Europe. When do you expect to leave?" I asked.

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"I don't know," she said. "When my father is ready to go, I guess."

"I suppose you and your father have talked about it a lot," I said, watching her. "Planning a thing like that is half the fun."

She had a strange unhappy frown. "We haven't made plans."

"But he's told you where you're going—the places you'll see?"

"I'll probably have to be in school." She made a grimace. "He wants that. Some place like Paris."

"You'll love Paris. Has he told you what school?"

"We haven't talked about it for a while."

"Since Saturday?" I tried to make it sound commonplace, leaning forward to toss my cigarette butt into the fire. As I turned toward her, I sensed a quick movement of her head as though she'd been staring at me and tried to hide it as I looked around.

"Since Saturday?" I repeated.

She didn't answer.

"When have you seen your father last?" I asked.

"He was here last April."

"You mean you haven't seen him since?"

"No." She said it very carefully, but she wasn't looking at me now.

I thought I heard the creaky floor board in the hall but I couldn't see the door without getting out of my seat.

"Mind if I shed this thing?" I stood up and took off the bush jacket.

As I tossed it over the back of the settee, I watched the doorway. There was no one there.

"That's interesting—" I was going to try to pin her more definitely about Purcell but she was standing now and I could tell by her eyes it wasn't going to get me any place— "that portrait above the fireplace," I stalled. "Your mother?"

She turned her eyes to it. "Yes." Her voice was husky and she had the inaccessible look again.

"She looks like the woman in these photographs."

"It was painted soon after Mother was married."

"It's very charming." I moved closer and tried to find a signature. "I wonder who painted it."

"Grandfather Metcalf had it done by an artist he knew. There's a painting he did of Grandfather in the dining room."

It was a chance to get a look into the hall. "Would you mind showing it to me?" I asked.

Her eyes were that pale honey color but I couldn't see behind them. She seemed to examine me and my question for a moment and then, without speaking, she moved toward the door.

I followed her into the dim hall, trying to spot the creaky floor board. It came sooner than I expected—just to the left of the

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door. Dana led the way toward the rear of the house and I walked behind, watching the smooth, unconscious grace of her.

The dining room was back of the library, under Belle's room. It was dark with dusty looking drapes at the windows and old scenic wallpaper above a dado. There was a Duncan Phyfe table and a nice Sheraton sideboard with silver candelabra tarnished nearly black. In the shadowy space on the wall above it, hung a portrait of a man. Dana stopped by the table as I walked over to the sideboard.

The painting had the same primitive bleakness of technique as the small one in the library, hard and cold as the figurehead of a ship, but it was still a man looking out at me from the canvas. There was a robust look about him and a glint in his eyes. I doubted if he looked much like his grandson. In this shadow it was impossible to make out a signature.

Dana moved up beside me. "Light one of those," she suggested.

I struck a match and touched it to the candles, lifting the silver candelabrum close to the surface of the painting. If the artist had signed it, it was lost in the smoky depths of paint.

"I can't see a signature," I said, "but it's a nice job. You must be very proud of it."

I don't believe she'd ever thought of it that way. I watched her eyes reflect the candle flames as she stared at the painting.

"He isn't really my grandfather," she said.

"Tell me about it."

"My name is Purcell."

I waited.

"This was Mother's first husband's father." She actually laughed. "Does that sound mixed-up?"

"I think I get it," I said. "This is your half-brother's grandfather."

If she was surprised she didn't show it. "His name was Anson, too," she said.

"You never saw him, of course? The grandfather?"

"I can't even remember Mother." It was a little girl in the dark. "She died when I was born."

"I'm sorry. But you still have your father."

She looked dreamy and complacent like a child who has some secret wrapped inside her. "I've only seen him the once that I can remember. When he came here last spring."

"You say your name is Purcell," I said. "I guess you knew that a man named Purcell came to the inn at Fairfax Springs on Saturday."

The brows stretched back and the pupils contracted. She didn't answer; she kept watching me.

"But you had to know it or you wouldn't have sent him that message," I said.

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Her eyes were wide as if the skin on her face was being pulled back from behind but she still didn't speak.

"The colored boy who works here delivered your message Saturday—to Mr. Purcell."

"I don't know what you mean."

I hated to see her change back into something cold and hostile but I'd come up here to find out two things.

"Saturday—the day your brother Anson flew his eagle."

"We fly a peregrine." She recited it, not letting her eyes move from mine.

"He flew a golden eagle Saturday," I said.

Fear or shadows from the candles skinned the flesh from her face. The bones were beautiful.

I shrugged, and then an idea came to me. "At one-thirty Saturday he was near the house here and flew it."

I watched the blood come back to her face and she started breathing again. "If you were a falconer, you'd know its impossible to fly any hawk in the middle of the day. Warm air currents carry them away." There were damp marks on the dustry mahogany of the sideboard when her hands came off the edge. "And anyway. Brother wasn't here at one-thirty Saturday. I'm sorry if someone's setter got killed but we're always getting blamed for things passage eagles do, just because we fly hawks."

"If your brother wasn't here Saturday at one-thirty, where was he?" I asked carefully.

"He wasn't here any time near one-thirty." She was almost haughty. "He took the car and drove over to the rocks. Do you believe me now?"

"Yes, I do believe you, Dana. One more thing. What was he doing?"

"If you must know, he went to tie a rabbit over there." She was a little less sure of herself.

"So he wasn't here from about one until maybe around two?"

"Yes." My estimate seemed to surpise her.

"That rabbit he tied out over at the rock—it seems like a strange way to treat rabbits. Won't something kill it?"

She was on guard again. "We use them for training."

"I see." It seemed a low thing to do but I had to do it. "You keep trying to convince me that you only fly a peregrine. I suppose it's too uncertain trying to find wild rabbits to fly your peregine at and, as you have pointed out, furnishing your own targets saves the wild game."

She nodded, watching me uneasily.

"May I quote from one of your books on falconry: Peregrines take their quarry on the wing, the broadwinged hawks and eagles

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kill their prey on the ground. That may not be verbatim but I think you follow me. If your brother tied that rabbit out for bait, just what kind of hawk are you training?"

If I had hit her she would have looked the same. It took a moment but she came back loyally. "I might have been mistaken about it being a rabbit." She was a little breathless.

"You mean it might have been one of those chickens I saw in your pen yesterday? I don't think it would make a very effective flying target."

She looked as if she hated me. "Go away. I don't want to talk to you any more."

Her eyes were dilated now, like the peregrine's when it watched me from the perching block.

"All right, Dana," I said. "I'm sorry."

I let her pass and walk ahead of me, out of the dining room and along the hall. As she was going through the doorway to the library she stopped. I could see over her shoulder into the room.

Luger had something on the floor, mauling it. It had been my bush jacket. From what I could see of it I was awfully glad I wasn't in it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"GET OUT OF SIGHT." There was fright in her whisper. With one motion she caught the door and stepped inside, slamming it shut.

I could her her voice through the panels. "Luger, stop it. No."

There was a growl that sounded as if it came through cloth, rising in pitch with a tearing sound—then the thud of furniture and the scuffling came closer.

I opened the door across the hall and backed inside, closing it behind me. I was in a cold, parlorish looking room with horsehair upholstered furniture that had the air of waiting for the next Metcalf funeral.

In the hall I heard Dana muttering, "Luger," between her teeth, accompanied by a slapping sound. It faded toward the rear of the house and was followed by the slam of a door.

When I stepped out, Dana was coming toward me, looking at the heel of her hand and rubbing it.

"Luger doesn't do much for my ego," I said. "Are you all right?"

She didn't look at me. She straightened a rag rug with her foot and moved ahead of me into the library.

I followed her and picked up the wet piece of cloth off the floor. It looked more like a grass skirt than a bush jacket. It had been

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a good one and I'd always liked it, ever since I saw it in the shop in Sydney. I suppose it hadn't been anybody's fault but it galled me to have it predigested by that black bastard.

"I guess I'll go," I said, "if he hasn't masticated my hat."

"We'll see that you're paid for your loss." It was wonderful and it put me properly where I belonged.

I went into the hall and started for the door.

"You'll have to have something to wear." She still wouldn't dignify me with a glance.

"What, exactly—" the words came from somewhere up the stairs behind us—"is the trouble, Dana?"

It was a rich, Byronic sort of voice, slightly nasal. I don't know what I had expected but it didn't fit my picture of what it ought to sound like. With that voice, the old house ceased to be a gloomy pile of ancient brick with a lone girl wandering through its rooms followed by two shadows—one blind, the other some nameless thing—and became, again, the ante-bellum country seat with yard servants and a stable boy bringing a pair of spanking bays around for the master's afternoon drive. I expected him to descend the stairs, drawing on his gloves, and I could almost hear the impatient hoofs outside and the creak of leather. It didn't happen.

I kept saying to myself, *Why don't I run up the stairs? That's what I came for, to get a look at him.* The voice had a strange, imperious quality of unapproachable privacy you couldn't force yourself in on. I told myself no voice could do that to me. All I had to do was break through this insane inertia and run up those stairs. I just stood there.

I lost whatever Dana said, the voice still had me in its grip. I heard it say, "Very well, don't let a guest leave our home without enough to keep him warm. There should be something of mine in the hall closet. Give it to him and assure him that whatever Luger destroyed shall be replaced if it is within our power. Offer my regrets for what has happened."

"That's all right," I mumbled. I watched the stairs for some sign of him.

"My apology, Mr. Gratton, for not coming down. Please know that Luger shall be punished."

"You can't blame the dog," I said, like a water-brained moron.

Dana had opened a closet near the entrance door and was holding something toward me as if there was a risk of touching my hand. It was some kind of knee-length sporting garment in hunter's green with a parka hood, edged and lined with white fur. It was a beautifully made thing, too bulky for skiing, but wonderful for wear around a country place.

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"This is entirely unnecessary," I said, trying to get back to solid footing. "Put it away." I opened the door and the wind hit me like a sheet of ice water.

"Brother says to take it," Dana said.

I put it on, feeling like a dog-team driver, but it was nice and warm. "I'll return this as soon as possible."

"You needn't." She wouldn't look at me.

"Well, thank him," I said, but she had closed the door.

As I went down the steps I had the feeling I had apologized to everyone but Luger.

I was part way across the yard when something moved at the corner of the house. It was Cricket, with her black coat wrapped around her. She had a small piece of paper in one hand, keeping it close to her side as if she wanted to hide it.

As she heard me coming, she held it out and whispered hoarsely, "Don't say nothin', jes take this."

Something about the way she said it made me know I had to. My hand closed over the paper, touching the claw-cold fingers. I jammed my first into one of the parka pockets and, without looking toward the house, kept on walking.

At the far end of the dead orchard I stepped into the woods. The wind was cold, whipping the paper like the leaves around me as I unfolded it. It was a note Cricket had given me, penciled in shaky lettering like a child's. The beginning of the second line was superimposed blindly on the first, where the words had been started too high, but in spite of that and its spelling it carried its message as clearly as if she were at my side.

YOU GO UP ON SPINY ROKS
AFORE SUNDOWN YOU FINE
WHAT YOU LOOKIN FORE

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHEN I GOT to the Jaguar I pulled the fur-lined hood up around my face and sat there staring at Cricket's note. Something was going on in the old Metcalf house. Whatever it was showed in Dana's eyes and was worrying Cricket. I read the note again.

There wasn't any question about which rocks she meant, but why before sundown? I looked at the sky. It was too cloudy to see the sun.

My watch said 5:30. If after sundown today would be too late, what could be there on the rocks that Red and I wouldn't have seen Sunday morning? We'd covered them pretty thoroughly before that business about Charm. Especially on the east side.

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The more I thought about that, the more obvious it seemed. It struck out so. I couldn't see how I'd missed it. A man knocked off that narrow spine of rocks could fall on either side—depending upon which direction the thing that hit him had been traveling. The place to search was on the west side.

I turned the Jaguar and started down the road toward Sleepy Creek Mountain.

When I came to the pull-off space I turned in but I still hadn't made up my mind. There was no hurry about this. Anything that had been in those rocks since late Saturday afternoon would still be there tomorrow.

The old log road I'd noticed yesterday led back along the west side of the ridge in the right direction so I took it. It had grown up to briers and small saplings so that it was thicker than the woods on either side but I followed it rather than take the irregular footing among the trees. Some of the stems had been tramped down but it could have been a deer or some other animal passing through. I pushed on until I came to the base of the cliff. It was very much like the east side—desolate, wild, maybe a few more rock fragments piled around, more laurel clinging to the sides. I started searching among the trees and back in the crevices when I could reach them.

I soon saw I wasn't getting any place. It would take two or three men a day to cover this. I took out Cricket's note and read it again. It definitely said GO UP ON SPINY ROKS.

I looked above me. Something falling from the top might have lodged on one of those shelves or in a crevice. Getting it out of there could be a problem, which might be why it hadn't been accomplished before this. If I was going to do much searching while it was light I'd have to hurry.

I turned and retraced my steps along the log road.

Back at the gap, the Jaguar and the paved highway were incongruous touches in this lonely place but in my state of mind they looked good. So good I wished I didn't have to walk away from them.

This time I took the path that climbed the shoulder. I noticed my pulse was hitting it a little fast. It wasn't altogether the steep pull.

Once up on the rocks, they seemed narrower than I remembered. I pushed the furry parka hood back from my face and started out. It's one of those things you do and tell yourself it's all right. The wind wasn't so bad but any force against you when you're balancing on a hogback ledge with nothing on either side makes you feel like the tower on top of the Empire State. Even

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on the wider places I found myself going along baboon fashion with one hand reaching down just to get the feel of something solid.

It was quite light up here above the trees and the quiet emptiness reached out all around me like a sea. It would be a wonderful place to come if you had a taste for views.

I worked my way out the rocks, making an effort to keep my mind off where I was and trying to be methodical. By using both hands I could peer down the west face into the fissures. Several large clumps of mountain laurel clung to the brink and somehow managed to grow in tangles down among the huge splits, making it difficult to penetrate the depths. That dark mass of stuff could have hidden the contents of a good-sized cemetery.

I squinted my eyes against the wind and wished I was out of here.

Somewhere, very far away, I heard the droning hum of a plane. I straightened and shoved the fur hood away from my ears and the sound was less hypnotic.

I wished I was in that plane going some place. Any place, where there were people.

One of the bad parts of being up here was the wind—the way it came at you, pushing you off-balance, then letting up, which was nearly as treacherous. Now there was also the sound of it as it seemed suddenly to rise in pitch with a hissing whistle. Instinctively I braced myself against it but it wasn't there. The reflex threw me off-balance and I went onto all fours, clawing at the rocks to hang on. Air fanned my face as a huge shadow skimmed over my head from behind like a dive bomber with landing gear extended.

Wings and tail flared and pulled out of the dive with a sickening, fluttering sound of wind through feathers. I've never seen anything look so large as those outstretched wings against the sky. As the eagle rolled off in a bank, the feathered legs drew slowly up out of sight with two slender thongs trailing out behind. Those hadn't been Charm's entrails stringing out from the eagle's claws Sunday.

We call them jesses.

Raw fear had me frozen like a rabbit facing death, crouching there with jelly instead of muscles.

The eagle had wheeled out of view and I lay feeling my legs try to move the way you do in a nightmare and only twitch. After repeated efforts, I wobbled to my feet and with nothing in mind but to get away from there, scrambled out the rocks, my feet trying to dig into the rough surface. I heard the whining wings again and jerked down. Something hard and sharp struck my neck and raked

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the back of my scalp. It knocked me face-down and I felt hot sweat running over my neck and forward past my ears. I tried to wipe it out of my eyes but I was looking through a film of red blurring the big bird zooming up again. There was no pain, yet—just insane, animal rage at being battered and deliberately ripped into strips like a piece of bait. I was on my hands and knees now, yelling. I think I said, "God damn you." It came out a hoarse croak but as the eagle banked, it actually turned its head to watch me.

I was getting set for the sound again. That was the worst part—that sound. Knowing it would come, and come, and come again till it finished me or I went off the rocks.

I squeezed my eyes tight to get the blood out of them and stared ahead. There was a clump of mountain laured growing stubbornly at the left edge maybe eight or ten yards in front of me. I started crawling—my hands tearing at the rocks, praying for time. Several feet from the bush I knew I hadn't made it. I sensed it coming, more with the small of my back than with my ears.

I made the plunge from my knees and caught the branches of the laurel, feeling it give with my weight. The spring of it let me down over the west side, gasping and choking for breath—my feet scraping sheer rock for a hold, then swinging free. For a moment I thought the laurel was coming loose but it held. I pulled myself up from underneath into the tangle of branches, wedging as far into the center as I could.

The eagle was on the rocks now, about level with my shoulders and coming at the laurel clump in a hopping clumsy gait. I could see the frowning head, flattened and long, the razor-sharp black-prowed beak running back under the eyes like thin lips into a mirthless yellow smile—the expression of a professional killer who feels it his duty to look mean. The huge thing waddled around the edge of the laurel clump on stiff legs feathered to the claws. The whole look of it, the large-scale feathers, the deadly intensity, more than that—the fact that it moved, that it was doing this to me, was something I wasn't supposed to believe.

When it saw it couldn't reach me, it took off the edge of the cliff and started circling low around the bush, screaming like a lunatic. Suddenly it bored in, its golden head extended with the assassin look in its eyes. Twigs snapped and huge pinions beat the foliage as it came with feet thrown forward, trying to drive the talons deep enough to reach me. As I kept turning, hoping to keep my face covered with my arms, it made repeated efforts to strike me from behind. I thought

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it might be the blood on my neck that attracted it and tried to cover it up with the fur-lined parka hood.

As my fingers touched the fur, nice—long—white fur, I suddenly got it. I told myself it wasn't possible but I knew as I did it that I'd never been so wrong.

In a numbed daze I unfastened the zipper and fought my way out of the parka sleeves, struggling among the branches to dodge those lunging claws. I got it off and shoved it through the limbs, pushing it with my foot till it was almost free of the bush.

The eagle hit it the instant it came in reach. The part it went for was the hood, sinking its talons into the white fur. As it balanced there on the brink of the cliff, it couldn't seem to believe there was no flesh underneath for it kept tearing off chunks of fur that rolled along the rocks like milkweed down. There was a bad moment when I thought it was going to remember me but, instead, it spread its wings and went out over the edge, dragging the parka with it. When the heavy garment cleared the rocks it slipped from the eagle's grasp and dropped. The eagle followed it down, striking it once, and then again, knocking out tufts of fur that floated in the wind.

I clung there and tried to stop shaking. In the distance I could still hear the droning plane. If it hadn't been for that I would have known it had been a year.

After a long time I let myself think again. The eagle hadn't screamed for a while so he must have gone but I still couldn't risk moving into the open until dark. But dark wouldn't be long in coming.

While I lay quiet my mind went back to white fur. White rabbits, white chickens. *We use them for training.* An almost-white setter puppy.

Flying that eagle at Charm might have been just an accident. Flying it at me had most certainly not.

I was pretty sure that Doberman hadn't been loose in the house when I arrived there. I was just as certain he hadn't opened the door and got in by himself to tear up my jacket. Someone had used that white fur hood to tag me for a piece of cold meat. Then I'd been steered to these rocks and set up for the kill. I wondered if I had made satisfactory sport for eyes watching through glasses over on Third Hill.

It was nearly dark now. Very carefully keeping away from the cliff side of the bush, I pushed myself through the tangled branches and crawled out on the rocks.

It was cold with nothing more than a sweater on but, somehow, it seemed to help keep my thinking clear.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE FIRST THING I DID when I got to the Jaguar was open the rear compartment and dig out my plastic raincoat. It felt stiff and cold as I put it on but there was nothing else in the car to wear. That and my hat I'd left on the seat.

Next, I found my flashlight and, unlocking my photographic equipment case, got out the flash bulb attachment and hooked it to the Leica.

It was quite dark now and I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be kept waiting long.

I started up the path to the rocks, the Leica with its flash attachment swinging awkwardly from its neck strap at my front. Once out on the rocks, it was slow going—using my light only when I had to, holding it close to my feet and for a second at a time.

It wasn't easy to make myself go back out there again. When I came to a place about four feet wide I decided I'd better take it. I had no way of knowing how well I could see down over the sides but I couldn't risk using my light to find out now. I had room enough to huddle against a point of rock which broke the stiff wind cutting from the west.

As I turned, I thought I saw what I was waiting for—a sweeping finger of light in the general direction of the gap.

I crouched in the dark waiting for it to come again. It did, and then another one—far off in the east. Air lane beacons. I let the tightness out of my legs and breathed.

As well as I could remember, the drop on either side was about forty or fifty feet. Hovering over my light to shield it, I set my camera range and shutter speed. Then I straightened and, making myself as comfortable as I could, settled down to wait.

Sitting there in the dark, I couldn't say how long it was. When it did come it tightened me up like a guitar string suddenly pulled to the snapping point. To anyone else it might have been just a light moving intermittently down among the trees on the west side of the rocks. It was back towards the gap when I saw it first but each time it reappeared it was a little closer. Someone coming to clean up what should be down at the foot of the rocks. If I were lying down there now, a hand would come reaching for a pulse; into my pocket for my car keys. If there were still a pulse, there wouldn't be one long and tomorrow, maybe the next day, my Jaguar would be found in the Potomac River. It had happened once. It was happening again.

The light was taking its time, moving left and right as it came,

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like someone doing a careful job of sweeping.

The light was close in at the base of the cliff, approaching a point below me when I heard it speak. I couldn't tell much about the voice. It was saying things like "not yet" and "just a little while now."

I was on my knees, waiting for the light to stab up at my perch.

When it came I was ready, hunched behind the protecting rock. By the time it was back on the ground I had straightened and, getting it as a tiny point of light in the Leica's viewfinder, I pressed the shutter trigger.

The flash bulb opened up the night with a white-hot glare and was gone with a pattern of light and shadow burning on my retina. It had shown me a man's face—not a girl's. That seemed important. I hadn't been able to see much more than the face—a face that wasn't quite anything I'd seen before. With luck, the camera had the rest.

My sight was just leveling off to normal when there was the shallow crack of a pistol and something sang off the rock above my head, showering me with sand. It had taken his eyes about the same time as mine. I shrank a size smaller and waited.

The second shot went over me—his lateral alignment was okay but he was counting on my standing up. Then came the stabbing finger of light, and the voice. "Go get him, Luger." That part, I hadn't counted on.

His light was playing over the open stretch of rock to my left like a fire hose. By keeping myself on the edge away from him I was able to crawl out the ridge, getting enough protection from the irregular profile.

I could hear the Doberman running along the base of the rocks, his nails scratching as he tried to get started up the side. He didn't bark but each time I shifted positions I heard him shift with me and stop. Then always there'd be that reaching light. And I'd move again.

I was at a place so open I could see the sharp ears and sleek body down below standing motionless with cocked head and muzzle lifted as the probing light passed over. I scrambled out of sight and my hat rolled off and lay where the beam came up and picked it out. There was another sharp crack that snapped the hat off into the dark like a stroke from a bull whip. I hoped that would do it.

Luger spoiled it by trotting along the base of the rocks to below my new location. It wasn't long before the light came too.

I had been forced out beyond the laurel bush in a one-sided game of tag. It was the way this affair had been from the first, with always that reaching for me

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out of the dark. We seemed to have come to what both of us had been waiting for. The thing with the eagle had been at full pitch where this was muted. I don't know which was worse.

I remembered that from here on, the rocks lay in more broken masses toward the base. I hadn't been to the far end so I couldn't tell how it was going to be.

Luger answered that one. I had thought he was still below me but I heard something further out that sounded as if he was coming up. I didn't know if a Doberman used his nose but once he got on top he wouldn't need it.

The flash beam was staying patiently along the edge, several feet to the left of where I was flattened among some rock fragments. Crawling back through it would be the same as pulling the trigger myself. From the intensity of the light I didn't think the cliff was high out here. I wondered if it was too high on the east side to jump.

I lay there trying to get up guts enough to consider it, while a chunk of rock dug into my side. I shifted to another position and felt my flashlight in my raincoat pocket.

I could hear Luger clawing at the boulders and I knew sooner or later he'd make it. I tried moving some of the rock fragments beside me till I found one I could handle. Then, getting to one knee, I cocked my arm with my flashlight in my hand. As I pushed the catch on, I threw it out over the west edge like a grenade in a spiralling arc of light. I raised up to watch it and saw it hit the ground and go out. Then, grabbing the piece of rock I gave it all I could with both hands and sent it after the flashlight.

There was a moment till it landed, then I heard it bounding down the steep slope through the leaves. It got reactions.

"Luger, down here. Quick." The other light was stabbing at the trees below. I heard Luger take off the boulders and hit the ground running. I heard feet running too.

The rocks were completely dark now and I started back, my Leica hanging from my neck, my raw hands groping and feeling every foot, but each foot was that much farther away from the sounds growing fainter behind me.

After long enough, it really was there—the end of the rocks, the path to the road, the Jaguar. I pulled myself in, started the engine and let it take me down the mountain.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When I came to the edge of town I was surprised to see lights in so many of the houses. The Springs was up late tonight. The clock on the instrument panel must have stopped at a little before 8:30. My watch said not quite 8:30, too. I held it to my ear. It was still running.

There were lights in two of the basement windows of the courthouse when I pulled to the curb and parked. As I walked back along the iron fence under trees reflecting the street lights in unreal autumn color, I knew this was the thing to do. It wasn't just an illusion now—it was something that had happened to me.

I pushed open the old courthouse doors, smooth from generations of hands. The hall was empty, overheated, and saturated with the smell of humanity. At the foot of the stairs to the basement I found what I was looking for. One door said West Virginia State Police, Private. The one next to it said West Virginia State Police, Entrance.

The room I stepped into was dark but I could see through an open door into the next one, fully lighted. There were two men in uniform sitting across a desk from each other. The one with the hat on was the corporal I'd seen at the inn.

When I stepped through the door the two stopped talking and the one without his hat looked up as though this were a lodge room I hadn't any business coming into.

"I'd like to talk to you as soon as I can," I said.

Neither of them spoke. The corporal got up and walked out past me as if the gun on his belt was too heavy. The sergeant pointed to the corporal's chair and I sat down. The seat was warm.

"Have you found Purcell?" I asked.

He watched me with a tired expression and said, "No."

"I think I have something for you," I said.

He reached for a memo pad and dragged it to him.

"Last Saturday I saw a man up on—"

"What's your name?" He held his pencil ready.

"Gratton. I'm a photographer from—"

"What's your full name?" he repeated without looking up.

We did the drill, everything in proper order including my date of birth, like checking in at a hospital.

Still without raising his head he said, "Last Saturday you saw a man."

I told him most of it, all the way through this afternoon and evening. It didn't excite him.

"Everybody's seen him," he said and looked at me for a change.

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"With a man like Purcell, it gets too important. They've seen Cadillacs all over the county, they've seen a man walking along a road at night, they're all using their imaginations. But has anyone seen the car go over into the river?"

"I'm not imagining this." I showed him the back of my neck.

He looked at it and said, "Sure, an eagle hit you."

"But there's the connection with this Metcalf," I said. "Yoke Gairdner can give you that."

"We've heard from him, too, along with all the others, including Washington, D. C. It's not my fault we're not getting anywhere. They can't blame me if everybody keeps dumping a lot of irrelevant material on top of me." He pushed the memo with my story away from him. "We'll get after it."

"I think if we went up to those rocks with enough men we could find him," I said.

He looked at me as if I'd suggested the Marines.

"We'll get after it," he said as if he were trying to control his temper. "We can't do it tonight."

As I stood up I felt awfully tired. "If you want me I'll be at the inn."

I drove over to the inn and parked in my usual place by the hedge. Then I took out my case of photographic stuff and lugged it inside. Tonight it felt full of bricks.

Up in my room I got to work. In a short time I made the bath into a fairly efficient darkroom. I didn't have equipment to blow up my prints but I could use my magnifying glass to study the 35 mm. contacts. I wished now I hadn't sent the other film to New York to be developed. I would have liked to examine that shot of the eagle to see if any jesses showed.

Most of this roll was unexposed. I skipped the two pictures of Butcher Boy alone and concentrated on the flash exposure. While I was about it I made a print of my shot of Dana throwing off the peregrine.

Back in the bedroom I laid the tiny, still-damp prints under the desk lamp and sat down.

The flashlight exposure had been good—a thin bareheaded man, I couldn't tell how tall, in a belted coat showing breeches and boots below like an old hunting print, with a flashlight in one hand and a pick or mattock in the other. It was a nice candid shot with the subject unaware of the camera. It was the large aquiline nose and uncombed hair, black and long over the ears and neck, that made me certain it was the same person as in the pictures up at the Metcalf place, but he looked old.

I'd thought of him as an arrogant kid only a few years older than Dana. Maybe it was Yoke Gairdner's speaking of him as Young Anson, maybe those pic-

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tures taken years ago. I remembered now that Gairdner had said Anson was past 17 when his mother married the second time. So he would have been past 18 when Dana was born. If she was less than 18 now, that would put him around 36. Something had cut deeper than that into the face I had in front of me.

More than the face or the feral attitude of an animal that has tripped a flash exposure while on the prowl, what chilled me was the idea of that mattock in his hand and what it had to do with me.

I turned to my picture of Dana. Under the magnifying glass she seemed very real, her bare arm thrown out, the motion of launching the hawk stretching her body under her clothes, lifting her to her toes like an adagio movement in ballet. I studied the upturned eager face, ecstatically half-closed eyes, the parted lips drawn back in the wind, looking at that hawk. I wished she'd look like that—just once—when she looked at me.

I lit a cigarette and exhaled toward the ceiling. Why did I care how she looked, what did I know about her, anyway? There had been an underlying feeling there all along — something that kept us at a distance. If she knew nothing about this thing, why was she so secretive about the eagle? I'd seen it go back to her fist, so she must have flown it some.

I looked at my watch. It still wasn't midnight.

I picked up the phone and asked for a town and a name. It took a little while to get him. When he answered, it sounded as if he'd already hit the sack.

"Hello, Red," I said. "This is Grat."

He said he hadn't expected to hear from me and I said, no, I hadn't expected to call him till just now. Then I got down to business.

"Red, will you meet me tomorrow, early, at the crossroads? I need some help up on Spine Rocks."

"You still think something happened up there Saturday?"

"Yes—and the same thing nearly happened again today."

"What?"

"I believe you heard me."

"Anything to do with that eagle?" His voice was hungering.

"Yes. Just about sundown tonight it was flown at me."

I heard him whistle, and then he got it.

"You say *flown at you?*" he demanded, his voice rising.

"I'll tell you about it when I see you. Can you make it about daylight?"

"If the eagle came at you that late today he'll be perched near there now," he said. "We'll have to get there before daylight or he'll move out on us when it gets light."

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"Say that again," I said.

"If the eagle didn't make a kill —and I take it he didn't," he laughed flatly—"he'd hang around there all night. In other words, being as near evening as that, I wouldn't expect him to go back to wherever he came from until daylight tomorrow." He paused. "Are you still there, Grat?"

"Yes. I'm just thinking," I said. "That changes things. When could we meet if you left Romney right now?"

"Now?" he asked incredulously. "In the middle of the night?"

"Yes."

"Well, taking time to dress and grab a bite to eat, I could get there about two-thirty." He sounded puzzled.

"I'll meet you at the crossroads at two-thirty," I said. "And Red, bring a gun if you have one."

"What kind of gun?"

"Something that would kill an eagle or a dog. And one more thing, Red," I said—"bring something we can dig with."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"THAT'S THE WAY IT HAPPENED," I said. We were sitting in my Jaguar with Red's jeep parked behind us in the dark. "I wanted to fill you in before we go up on the mountain. I imagined the eagle would have gone back to him till you said you didn't think so. That gave me hope."

"Yes," Red said, down in his throat, "I think we stand a chance of getting it." His hands knotted into big fists on his knees.

"The important thing," I said, "is to keep that eagle alive."

"What?" He was staring at me.

"I think Anson Metcalf would have killed it last night if it had gone back to him. This way, we just might be able to stop him."

From the sound Red made, I could tell he wasn't happy. "I don't follow you about keeping it alive," he said.

"He has that eagle trained to fly at white objects — white rabbits, white chickens, that white fur-lined hood on me. How he's done it I don't know but he's a falconer and there must be ways. I'm certain there was something white on Harrison Purcell."

I heard him sigh restlessly beside me.

"Yes," I said, "it was just bad luck that Charm was white."

"But why—" He made a hopeless gesture and gave up.

"I don't think he ever meant to kill Charm," I said. "It just happened the eagle was being flown then—or it got loose or something. My point is, if Anson gets his hands on that bird and destroys it there's much less chance of pinning all this on him. I can't understand why he didn't dispose of it

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after he used it to kill Harrison Purcell."

"How do you think you can tie it to Purcell?" he asked. "We didn't find anything up there."

"We looked on the wrong side," I said. "The eagle came from the east, the way it did at me. If it knocked him off he went down over the west side."

"What you plan, then, is to go to their house?"

"After we look below those rocks. You brought a digging tool?"

"Yes. But in this darkness?"

"I think with your jeep lights we'll manage," I said. "There's an old road we can drive back on. And I think we'd better get going."

"You want to leave your roadster here?" he asked.

"I'll take it up to the gap," I said. "We might need both."

There were a few stars breaking through the clouds as I pulled away from the crossroads and headed up the mountain with Red behind me in the jeep.

The gap on top of Sleepy Creek Mountain looked the same as when I'd left it. I drew the Jaguar off the road and pulled the brake. Then I walked back and climbed into the jeep with Red.

I steadied the shotgun leaning against the seat between us. "This loaded?"

He dug into his jacket pocket and handed across two shells.

I loaded it and laid it across my knees with the muzzle sticking out through the door. "Follow that old road," I said. "It's grown up but it's not too bad."

He swung the jeep off the highway, its lights boring deep into the opening, and we bounced along the irregular surface of the log road.

"There's been a car in here tonight," Red said. "See those weeds flattened there?"

I could see a double track showing lighter in the glare from our head lamps. We soon came to where it ended.

"That's as far as he went," Red said. "He's backed out."

"Suppose we could identify tire tracks?" I asked.

"Not in this grass. Maybe back at the road if there was any soft mud. How far do you want me to go?"

"Keep on till I tell you."

The jeep pushed ahead, forcing through the briers and small growth in the road like a tank mowing down brush.

"What about the girl?" Red asked.

"She's out of it," I said. "Harrison Purcell was her father."

"That's what you said," Red said. "But I wondered."

After a little while he asked:

"How do you think this Anson knew Purcell would be here at just this time?"

"I think he intercepted Purcell's

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letters to Dana."

"I mean up on these rocks," Red said.

"He did that himself. The telephone operator at Fairfax Springs heard the message. A man telling Purcell to come here."

"She heard this Anson tell him that?" Red asked.

"Not just that way. She heard someone—she thought a colored man—say he was a hired hand. He gave the message." I didn't go into the part about Dana's name. Red was still quiet and I said, "There isn't any hired man up there. Anson was away from the house at the time the call was made. There's no doubt in my mind that he drove to a phone and impersonated a colored man. Nearly anyone could do it on a telephone." I held up my hand. "We're just about under the cliff where I was this afternoon. Head it in toward the base of the rocks and leave your lights on."

We jounced off the old road and dodged between the trees, pushing over whip-size saplings that scraped against the underparts of the jeep.

"Hold it there," I said.

He turned the engine off and immense quiet seemed to press in on us. We climbed out. Far off in the southern sky I could see the air line beacon throwing its beam.

"My idea, Red, is to work all of this from here out, moving your lights as we eliminate each piece of territory. I don't think I could have seen him from the fire tower Saturday unless he'd been this far out on the rocks. I don't think we'll need the gun now."

"What about the tools?" Red asked. "I've got a fire rake and a mattock in there."

"Let's use the lights till we find something to dig for," I said.

We started working side by side, our shadows making long jerky steps in the path of light. It went much more slowly even than I had expected. There were so many humps and irregularities that were misleading, so many spaces the lights couldn't reach, so many leaves.

We moved the jeep from time to time, lighting up new segments. I could see where Luger had stirred the leaves as he followed below me along the cliff. I couldn't see Anson's tracks but Red pointed them out to me now and then. There was no trace of the parka. I had been pretty certain there wouldn't be.

We were well out toward the end of the rocks when we both decided to stop for a smoke. We'd been at it since about three o'clock. I held my watch in the headlight glare. It was nearly four-thirty.

I turned to Red. "It doesn't look very hopeful."

"Even if he's here," Red added. "I didn't expect to find him ly-

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ing on top of the ground," I said.

"I know you didn't."

"Do you think it would do any good to work back over it?"

"If you want to be on hand when that eagle gets home we won't have time."

"Let's try one more thing," I said. "I don't think he's out the ridge beyond this point unless he's been dragged there. Let's go back and work the other direction. I could be wrong."

Jeeps turn on a dime and it's a good thing they do or we wouldn't have got out of there. We found the place back on the log road where we had started and swung in again. We'd learned that we could cover more ground by getting close to the base of the rocks and heading the jeep parallel, which threw our lights in a long path rather than in short cross-segments.

I was working out in front of Red a little piece when I came to some long furrows in the leaves.

"What's been scratching here, Red?" I asked.

"It might be wild turkeys." He came over.

I moved my shadow out of the way.

"Those aren't turkey scratchings," he said, bending over. "And I don't think it's a buck. Some animal though, more likely a dog." He straightened. "Maybe the Doberman found fox scent."

"Why would a dog scratch up the leaves like that if he found fox scent?" I asked.

"Canine ego," he said. "They feel they have to obliterate the fox scent. And the fox retaliates when he returns. You've noticed the dogs along the streets in town."

"What scratches up the leaves like that?" I asked.

"You've seen dogs do that, rake back with their hind legs after they've left their scent. A sort of arrogant gesture just before they move off. They often go through it even on paved sidewalks. It isn't always just when they find animal scent. I've seen them do it on new-turned ground or dead campfire ashes."

He saw me looking at him.

"Yeah—" he said slowly. "New-turned earth."

"It doesn't look newly turned to me," I said, "with all those leaves."

"The leaves wouldn't make any difference," he said. "It's what's underneath that counts." He was raking the thick leaves away with his foot.

"Let's get the tools," I suggested.

Red drew the jeep up closer and we started digging.

It wasn't deep and it didn't take long. He'd been buried face down. That was why the back of the tweed jacket showed first.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WHEN WE GOT HIM OVER ON HIS back the jeep headlights showed a face raked with deep gouges. Three of them—parallel down the front with blood dried black along the edges. There was a mean-looking bruise on one temple that might, or might not, have been from the fall. It was a sensitive face with good breeding showing at the bridge of the nose and in the chin and jaw. He probably wasn't over sixty but the face looked older now with the blankness of death that adds years when the flame goes out.

There were particles of earth clinging to the eyebrows and clipped gray mustache that stirred as the wind gave movement to a face that had no further need of it. But more than anything, it was the thick snow-white hair growing back from the high forehead that I kept staring at. Disheveled, with leaf mold and dirt mixed in it, it still had the dash of a matinee idol clinging to one of his better features.

I looked up. "Get it, Red? White hair."

In the glaring lights, Red's face was as pale as the dead man's. "Yes," he said, "I think I do."

"I think we'll find that Anson Metcalf started using white targets to train his eagle sometime since last spring."

"Why?" Red asked and added: "I see why, of course, but I mean, why since last spring?"

"Because Harrison Purcell, here, was at the Metcalf place last spring and made the statement that he was coming back for his daughter Dana this fall."

"He looks like a nice guy," Red said.

"Yes," I said, "I think he was—a nice guy trying to do a nice thing."

"What do we do?" Red asked. "The State Police?"

"Yes. I think they might be interested now."

We left him lying there, a tall man in a tan tab-collar shirt, tweed jacket and tan slacks, correctly dressed for a country weekend. Our lights dimmed and then flared brighter as Red started the jeep's engine. As the beams swung away, Harrison Purcell was still staring at the stars.

Just before we reached the paved road, Red stopped the jeep.

"I want to see if there are any tire tracks," he said.

He climbed out, taking the shotgun with him. I followed him around in front of the jeep.

"Too dry," Red said. "No mud. Not even our own."

"Here are some." I pointed.

"Those are old ones. I'd say two or three days, at least. See how they've dried out and cracked?" He broke the shotgun and removed the shells.

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"That tire track is like one I saw in the Metcalf lane," I said. "The same diamond tread. Do you think it could have been made Saturday night?"

"This is Tuesday."

"Wednesday," I hastily corrected him.

"Well, yes, it's Wednesday now," Red said. "Those tracks aren't too old for that." He put the shotgun in the jeep and got in.

I got in beside him. "I think Anson Metcalf came here Saturday night and buried Purcell. It's possible he had to finish him—you saw that place on his temple. How he got Purcell's Cadillac into the Potomac River I don't know, unless he hid his own car and drove the Cadillac. It would be a long walk back."

"Fourteen miles, maybe less," Red said. "And he had all night to do it."

"I can't help wondering if it would have happened just this way if I hadn't been up in the tower to see it. And for Anson to see me."

"How else could it have happened?" Red asked.

"For example, why take the Cadillac up to the Potomac and dump it?"

"So no one would find the car parked here and start searching."

"... and discover Purcell lying, I suspect, unburied at the bottom of the cliff. Just an accident, falling off, or—if someone noticed the talon marks on his face—a victim of a wild eagle that knocked him off-balance. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, nothing, I suppose," Red said.

"I think that might have been the original idea—before I horned in. Of course, getting the Cadillac into the Potomac wasn't bad—a nice distance away from Purcell. If we hadn't found him tonight."

We were beside my Jaguar now.

"Shall we take your car?" Red asked. "It's faster."

I got out of the jeep and looked at my watch. "It's quarter after five. How long until daylight?"

"The sun comes up a little after six now." Red climbed out and peered at the sky. "This kind of weather, daybreak should be around five-thirty."

"Do you suppose the eagle's somewhere near?"

"Wherever it is, it may move off any time after day breaks."

"That doesn't allow too much time to get there." I nodded towards Third Hill.

"I don't like going in on Metcalf without the States," Red said. "There's going to be trouble and if he gets hurt—well, we ought to have some law along."

"We can't get the State Police over there in less than an hour. We're wasting time talking about it."

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"He may have trouble calling the eagle in to him. If one of us could be there to scare it away," Red said. "Look—let me go over. You go for the States."

"That's a good idea," I said, "only you've got it backwards. Take the Jaguar and go for the police." I handed him the keys. "You'll call them from the crossroads?"

"You'd better let me go over there," Red said.

"You don't know the place. I'll need your jeep to get in the lane. And the shells for that shotgun." I held out my hand.

He gave them to me. "Don't use that if you can help it," he said. "We'll get there as soon as possible."

"You'll know the lane," I said. "A mailbox and an old brick gate post."

He waited in my roadster till I got moving. Then the roar of the Jaguar reached me as I gunned the jeep down the road in the opposite direction.

I rattled along the paved road doing forty with an effort, down into the valley, climbing up the other side. At the Metcalf lane I slowed just enough to turn in. It's on that kind of terrain that a jeep takes over. I gripped the wheel and plowed through ruts and soft spots with the comfortable feel of Red's shotgun against my leg, counting on the curves to cover my approach.

At the old orchard I pulled off the lane and cut my lights. It was just light enough to make out the silhouettes of the dead apple trees against the skyline.

I drew Red's shotgun from the jeep and dropped the shells in with two icy little sounds. Then I started walking in the direction of the house, my feet feeling the way along the lane.

When I reached the edge of the yard I stopped, keeping back among the trees. It was light enough to see the small panes in the windows now and I leaned against a tree trunk and breathed the damp air and the fat fragrance of the pines.

For a time the old house seemed to sleep as if human problems had long since ceased to concern it. The light gradually strengthened above the trees and one of the roosters crowed. After a while I heard another sound that seemed to come from the pens. I decided it was the rabbits moving around inside.

I was trying to keep awake but even with the cold air it took a tremendous exertion of will to do it. I was opposite the north end of the house with enough view of both yards to see anyone leaving by either the front or rear doors. All I had to do was keep my eyes from going shut. I stood there working hard at it. After a while I began to wonder if anything was going to happen.

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I didn't know when it did. One moment I was staring fuzzily, trying to cover both exits simultaneously—the next, I was pulling out of a nodding doze. If there had been a sound I forgot it as my focus cleared and I saw him move off the rear porch and walk away from the house in the opposite direction. As far as I could see, Luger wasn't with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I GAVE HIM sixty yards and started after him, keeping the house between us by taking the driveway around the front. I stayed among the trees on the lower side but the dense growth opposite the house slowed me. With his lead and in this light I didn't think he could see if I cut across the lawn.

Holding the shotgun in one hand I pushed my way out and started running over the long leaf-strewn grass. I got to the far end of the house and was running for the place where I'd last seen him when a tapping jerked me around with the gun halfway to my shoulder.

It sounded like someone hammering on something hollow and it seemed to come from a point high above me. There was no one at either of the second-floor windows or on the roof. Then I saw something move against the little attic window high in the gable end of the old bricks—two hands beating the panes.

Keeping my eyes on the small window, I found the safety catch on the shotgun with my thumb and pushed it forward, moving toward the house. As I got closer I could make out Dana's face pressed against the glass. She looked as if she were trying to tell me something but I couldn't get the words. I motioned I was coming up and started running for the rear porch.

There were two doors. The one on the left was unlocked. I pushed it open and stepped into a dingy, smoky-smelling, old fashioned kitchen. I could see an ancient wood stove opposite me and a doorway in the right wall. I headed for it.

Part way across the room something rose from a chair like a small black ghost standing in my way. It nearly tripped me.

Cricket was trying to look as tall as possible but her shriveled face hardly reached my chest.

"I want to see Miss Dana, Cricket."

"Miss Dana not here. You go 'way."

"She's upstairs," I said, "and I'm going up." I started to move around her.

"You cain't see her. You git out of my kitchen."

She was like a tiny animal at

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bay, her head high, her body taut and quivering all the way to the small bony fist clenched around a paring knife with a blade worn down to nearly nothing. As I tried to squeeze between her and a table she came at me like a skinny, undersized cat. I blocked with the gun barrels and caught her wrist, twisting the knife from her hand. I threw it into a corner and shoved her away from me. As I made the door, I heard her fall back against some furniture. A chair went over and some china slid to the floor and shattered.

I was in the rear of the downstairs hall, running forward toward the stairway, taking the steps two at a time. At the top I started along the hall leading toward the front with the railing of the stair well on the left. By the gray half-light filtering through the doorway from Anson's room and the window at the front I could see the closed staircase to the attic. Beside it, exactly in the middle of the hall, stood Luger looking enormous and mean as sin.

He must have heard my scuffle with Cricket in the kitchen. There could be only one reason he hadn't intervened. He'd been put here and told to stay. If Dana could reach the bottom of the attic staircase there was just a chance she could control him.

"Dana."

If she heard me I couldn't tell. The only sound was old Cricket down below fumbling toward the stairs.

My voice had set Luger up on his toes. I could see the eighty or ninety pounds of him, like the muscles of a giant black snake, shifting under gleaming hide. All the time I could hear Cricket dragging herself up the stairs. Luger's ears were laid back now and I wasn't certain he hadn't moved a step closer. Then Cricket's voice came, wheezing and thin:

"Git him Luger."

I saw him go down for the spring and yelled, "No. Luger. No."

I might as well have been speaking *Bantu*. I shot from the hip. The first barrel missed. The second churned the ivory-and-pink snarl into a bloody mass almost a yard away from me. I leaped over the sprawling shape and reached the attic stair door, my ears ringing from the blast but not enough to shut out the sound of his nails twitching on the bare floor boards. I managed not to be sick and got the iron bolt pushed back and the door open.

The stairs were steep and dark and I had to feel my way to the top. I came out in a dusty dry-smelling attic full of old junk. There was a door on my right and I could hear someone beating on it. It had another flat, iron bolt like the one below. I slid it back

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and the door came toward me.

It was a slant-roofed room with a couch and the one small window at the end. There was a tray with dishes and uneaten food sitting on the floor beside the couch. Dana was wearing the same jodhpurs and sweater and suede vest she'd been wearing yesterday and from the looks of them, she'd spent the night in them. Her face seemed thin and she pushed her tangled hair back from her temples with both hands.

She tried to get past me. "Hurry. We've got to stop him."

"Just a moment." I held her arm. "What happened to you?"

"It's nothing." She was pulling me along. "We've got to hurry."

"When did your brother lock you in here?" I asked.

"Yesterday afternoon. We've got to stop him. He's going to kill Tundra."

"Tundra?"

She didn't answer. She was dragging me down the attic steps. At the bottom she saw Luger.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It was Luger or me."

Cricket struggled to her feet from beside the dog.

"Mistuh Anson kill you for this. You shoot his Luger."

"Hurry," was all Dana said, pushing past Cricket.

"Miss Dana, you stay where Mistuh Anson put you. You see what already happen." Cricket tried to hold her but she tore loose and ran down the steps. I caught up with her in the downstairs hall.

"This gun—" I said, trying to get my wind— "Do you have any shells?"

"You won't need it now," she said. "Come on."

She was out the back door, running in the direction Anson had gone. It was almost full daylight now and I could see heavy dew on the grass.

I followed her, running along a driveway through the trees till we reached a small brick building that looked like a carriage house or stable. Dana threw the door open and disappeared inside.

I found her in a small dark box stall, looking completely limp. There were two perches in the room—one a large crossbar padded with cloth, the other an arrangement similar to the perching block I had seen the first day above the house. Butcher Boy was sitting on the latter without his hood but still wearing his bells and jesses and with his leash attached to a metal ring. His yellow claws were clutching the block nervously and he was making small squeaky sounds, dipping over with his tail up and his head toward Dana. When he saw me he stopped and glared at me out of baleful eyes above drooping mustachios. The big perch beside him was empty. There were droppings splashed on the brick floor

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beneath it and a few brown feathers and pellets of tightly-rolled white fur scattered about. Dana was standing with one hand caressing the empty perch, crying like a little girl.

"Tell me, Dana." I put an arm around her shoulders, feeling the sobbing shake her. "What is it?"

"Don't you see?" She pointed to the crossbar. "Her perch is empty. He's killed Tundra."

"Tundra is his eagle, isn't it?"

"Tundra was mine," she flared. "I trained her, I loved her. She'd do anything for me." She was pressing her knuckles against her lips. "He tricked me."

"How?"

"Yesterday." She rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "Yesterday he found where I had her hidden."

"Why did you hide her?"

"Because he tried to kill her. Sunday morning I heard her cry and I came out here to her perch. She was gone and when I went to the clearing Brother had a knife. When I ran up and yelled she bated off his arm and flew free. I'd never seen him look like that. He wouldn't talk. He just walked away and went to the house."

"What time Sunday morning was that?" I asked.

"About this time, just after daylight. He'd been away all night, I don't know where. I'd stayed up waiting for him. It was dawn when I heard Tundra and ran out."

"When did you hide her?"

"When I got her back in, after the fog had lifted Sunday morning. She'd made a flight—" Dana stopped suddenly, moving away from my arm. Her voice was lower and the words came more slowly. "I wasn't to tell anyone we had her. Brother made me promise because it's illegal to keep an eagle—but now it doesn't matter. I got her to come in Sunday and took her way back along the ridge and tied her. Don't you understand—" she made a pathetic motion with her hand—"I had to keep Brother from finding her after he'd tried to kill her. He kept at me to take him to her. He said the Conservation men were coming and we'd have to destroy her. I wouldn't take him. He tried to follow me each time I went to feed her but I managed to slip away and get to her once a day."

"When did you bring her back?"

"I didn't. Brother tricked me yesterday. He pretended to be walking out the lane and I took that chance to go to Tundra. She'd been without food for nearly twenty hours. He must have circled and then followed me. I didn't know he'd locate her. When I went back to the house you were there." She hesitated and I was afraid she was going to remember not to trust me but

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she went on. "Brother came in while we were talking—remember, he was upstairs? Soon after you left, I realized he had disappeared. When I got out to where Tundra was hidden, she was gone."

"Yesterday, about sundown?" I asked.

She nodded. "When I got back—"

I interrupted. "I can't understand why he didn't kill her when he'd located her yesterday afternoon. He had the chance—after you'd left. Why did he come back to the house first?"

"Sunday he had tried a knife, I know why—" Dana was watching me—"so I wouldn't hear a shot. But it didn't work. I knew the next time it would be a gun."

"All right, but why didn't he use it yesterday after you left her? Before he came back to the house?"

"Because I'd taken the cartridge out of his automatic."

"But he could reload the gun when he got to the house—" I didn't have to go on from there. "Do you know anything about a note that Cricket wrote to me?"

She frowned. "Cricket can't write. She can't even write her name."

"Skip it," I said. "What happened after you found Tundra gone?"

"When I got back it was dark and Brother was in the library. I accused him of killing her. He acted strange but he said it was the only thing we could do. I threatened to go tell the Conservation men all about it and we had a row. Brother took me up to the attic and locked me in. While I was up there I wondered if he might be lying about Tundra. Just now, when I saw him leave the house I thought he must have her here in the mews. Then I saw you. I hoped you'd get me out in time save her but we're too late."

"I'm not sure it's too late," I said.

"What?" Her eyes were searching mine.

"This clearing you speak of—where is it?"

"Back through the woods."

"Let's get out there." I started toward the door. "There's a chance he hasn't got her yet."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DANA WAS a few yards ahead of me, running along the narrow path. I was still carrying the empty shotgun in my hand. As we passed a tangle of frost-killed vines on the right I could see mist lifting from the valley in small cumulus that picked up pink as they rose out of the shadow of our mountain. On a high point

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across the valley a gleam of light flashed from the Sleepy Creek fire tower where it reached into the clean sky and caught the rising sun in its glass.

It took all I had to catch up with her. "Hold it," I said, fighting for air. "How close are we?"

"Just ahead."

"Take it easy if he's there," I said. "If he gets flustered it's hard to tell what he'll do."

She slowed to a long-strided walk that was almost as fast as her running but she didn't answer.

I could make out an open piece of sky beyond the trees ahead of us. As we got closer, I saw a small sloping area, no larger than a garden, with an outcrop of flat rock fringed and partly covered with dead brown ferns taking up most of the space. There were trees all around it but the mountain dropped away so that the lower edge gave an open view of the valley and Sleepy Creek Mountain beyond. This was the small clearing I'd seen on Saturday from the tower. Our path came in on the upper side and we were close to him before we were certain he was there.

He was standing on the slab of rock with his back to us, swinging something by a long rope in circles above his head. If I hadn't seen Dana do it I would never have recognized it as a hawk lure. It was about the size of the one Dana used, maybe a little larger, but instead of being a leather bag this one was covered with white fur. He was still in boots and breeches and that belted coat he'd had on last night. There was no falconer's gauntlet on his hand and I couldn't see any sign of a gun about him.

I caught Dana's arm just as she broke into a run, pulling her back to me.

"Wait," I whispered against her ear, "till he sees the eagle. It'll be easier."

I stood there watching the sky, feeling her breathing hard beside me.

I don't know how long it had been going on before we got there. For what seemed an unbelievable time it kept up, just the man swinging this thing around in the air. Twice he stopped and rubbed his arm, as if to rest it, but almost at once he began again. Then—like a giant moth—the eagle was there, swooping over the tips of the trees. Its tail fanned showing the lap of each feather, its neck and long legs came forward, every pinion of its enormous wings flared in an effort to brake its momentum. As it zoomed in a graceful scoop that brought it up from below, it and the lure met like two trapeze performers and seemed to hang there, then settled to the ground in a flutter of wings with the curved talons deep in the white fur.

I had meant to move in while

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his attention was on the eagle but the sheer motion of it was hypnotic. As much as I hated the damned thing, I found myself thrilled by the perfection of timing and control of muscles or feathers or whatever they use to handle themselves like that. The bird had the lure on the ground smothered with its big wings sickeningly reminiscent of Charm and Sunday morning. The man closed in without my realizing what he was doing.

Dana must have seen the automatic before I did. She started ahead of me into the clearing screaming, "Ho Tundra! Hie off."

The eagle reared but the lure was too attractive.

With a frantic gesture Dana cried, "Gaze ho!"

Tundra dropped the lure, springing with her feathered legs while her wings beat the air in a labored slow-motion take-off.

He was so near he couldn't have missed with his eyes closed. There was a sharp report, followed by two more and Tundra folded, tumbling to the rock where she lay with her wings fluttering with a gentle movement, gradually slowing to a quiver too tiny for anything her size. It was like watching an ember glow smaller and smaller—watching those wings till the quiver ceased and became merely one or two feathers ruffled by the breeze.

"Brother — you — you —" Dana broke off and groped blindly toward the eagle. "Tundra."

"Stand back, Dana." Anson's voice was still correct and just about right now that I got a good look at him out in the light. He wasn't any taller than she was, but a lot older—a lightweight, flat-chested, narrow-shouldered esthete with a bony face and a too-large aquiline nose above a small mouth drawn in tight. The jutting chin went well with the thin arched eyebrows and black oily-looking hair and the beard stubble and dark areas under his eyes gave him a feverish look. There was a wiry, stringy quality about his body that indicated a certain amount of nervous strength but he didn't look too hard to take if it hadn't been for the gun and the eyes. The gun was looking for the middle button of my topcoat and the dark brown eyes, although pointed my direction, were focussed at something beyond any apparent range of vision. He still looked like an eighteenth century huntsman but what he was hunting was only in his mind.

He was speaking again. "You can drop that shotgun, Gratton."

I dropped it.

"You both saw that wild eagle attack me," he stated carefully.

"I saw you bring it in with a lure and kill it," I said.

He was kneeling by the dead bird now but keeping the pistol

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and his eyes on me. With his free hand he began playing with the limp talons. Then I saw what he was doing.

"No, Gratton, you're mistaken. I was throwing the lure for my peregrine and the eagle came at me. You saw it all."

"I see you now, taking the jesses off your own eagle—the one you flew at me."

He had the leather thongs off the eagle's ankles without even looking at them. Now he got to his feet and slipped the jesses into his coat pocket.

"No, Gratton, you see the eagle has no jesses on it. It's a wild bird." He shrugged. "It may have been the one that attacked you, I couldn't say, but you should be grateful to me for killing it."

"Maybe Dana should be grateful to you for killing Harrison Purcell."

"You're entirely confused, Gratton."

"I saw him on Spine Rocks Saturday afternoon. You killed him with that eagle, the way you tried to kill me. The difference was, he had white hair. You had to plant your white fur hood on me."

"Anson. *No.*" Dana's voice was harsh. "You said you put out a rabbit."

"He put out a man. We found Harrison Purcell's body less than an hour and a half ago."

"Go ahead. Tell him, Dana." Anson's voice was gentle. "Did I fly an eagle Saturday?"

Dana's answer didn't come. I turned. She was staring, gray-faced at Anson.

"You do see what I mean, Dana?" Anson asked affectionately. "This man's suffering from hallucinations."

"White hair." Dana was speaking slowly, as if she were reading backwards. "Rabbits and chickens—always white. But only after my father came last spring."

Anson was smiling on her like a doting uncle.

Dana was still watching him, wide-eyed. "You were displeased that Tundra had been trained on white arctic foxes before we got her, till last spring. Then we started using white targets. You said it was because—all along you—you— Oh, you beast." She covered her face and shuddered.

"You're mistaken, little sister. We never had an eagle. If you'll just recall Saturday."

"What's he talking about?" I asked. "He flew it Saturday. You must have seen him."

"No," Dana said dully. "He didn't fly Tundra Saturday. He was there, but he let me do it."

Anson was watching me with those eyes of his.

"Don't try it, Gratton." The hand with the gun began to shake.

"Brother—why?" Dana begged. "What reason was there? What had he ever done to you?"

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"What had he done? You ask me what Harrison Purcell had done?" The face twisted. "He took my mother—your mother, my beautiful mother—away from here, away from me. We were happy here and he came, with his talk of the world and foreign places. He took her out of this, here where she belonged, took her away from me. He didn't care about what happened to me. With that superior look of his he sneered down at me—me. Compared with my breeding, he was a peasant. When she sent for Cricket to come to her I went along and I found her—my beautiful mother—bloated and ugly, carrying his child while he went about his precious career as if it were all perfectly normal. My mother was his woman, she was only fit to bear his child." His voice was bitter.

The eyes were wide and reaching far beyond us again. They remained unblinking as tears streaked his face.

"You ask what he did. I saw her die when you were born. That man killed her. As certainly as though he'd used a knife, he killed her."

"You didn't kill me," Dana said. "I'm the one who caused her death."

"You were all I had left of her." There was a fierce, mad tenderness about him. "Cricket and I brought you back. You were half my mother. I could stamp out the other half, the part of him that was in you. I brought you up to love our life here where we belong. You gave me affection—in a small way you replaced her. And then, after years of contentment you had to see that picture of him. You had to write to him."

"He was my father," Dana said. "I had a right to know him."

"You brought him back. He came—for one last indignity for me to suffer—to take you from me." Anson's voice was climbing. "He'd done it once—taken the one thing I loved and killed it. He didn't do it again."

A sound reached me above the high pitch of his words. A car engine laboring up a grade. There was a chance I could needle him into talking long enough.

"Why didn't you let it go as an accident?" I asked. "Why bury him and take the Cadillac so far away?"

He came back in focus on me, pushing the long hair away from his forehead. "You." He jerked his head toward the ridge across the valley. "You with your camera and your inquiring binoculars trained on me from the tower." His upper lip lifted to one side. "Your impertinent questions, your fawning over Dana. I think you have made an unfortunate mistake."

"No, Anson," Dana cried. "You can't."

"Don't move in front of him, Dana. This man has come on my

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property, armed. He's threatened me and I'm within my rights to shoot in self-defense. You'll remember the details, little sister—just as you'll remember the details about last Saturday. Then there'll only be the two of us again, with nothing else to spoil it."

"There happens to be a flashlight exposure of you taken when you came to bury me last night," I said. "And a picture of your eagle flying back to you Saturday."

He stepped nearer but he was holding the gun too close to his side for me to reach.

Dana slid between us but Anson shook his head.

"No melodramatics, Dana. You have better taste than that."

"I'm thinking about you, Brother. And last Saturday. There's a better way—that leaves you out of it."

"Yes?" He didn't move his eyes from me.

"Luger," she said, "there behind you. Let Luger do it."

Anson's face lit up but he didn't turn. I think he was counting my pulse pounding in my head.

"You're learning, Dana. That's right, stand back." His face went blank. "All right, Luger." He snapped it like a drill sergeant. "Get him."

His eyes were absolutely empty, waiting, never leaving mine.

"You heard me, Luger." He frowned impatiently. "Get him."

"It's Tundra," Dana said breathlessly. "He's got hold of her."

"Damn you, Luger. I said, get him." Anson's head made a tiny move in the direction of the bird.

My left was never very smooth. This time it needed to be. It was better than that. It was perfect.

It caught him crosswise on the jaw and he went sprawling onto the rock. I tramped the hand still holding the gun but it wasn't necessary. He was out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

IT'S WITH ME STILL.

The Yale Club dining room twenty stories above the traffic sounds of Vanderbilt and Forty-Fourth may be a long way from the ridge across from Sleepy Creek Mountain, but not for me. The murmur of conversation, the brittle glaze of the women and the underplayed ties of the men, the no-longer-young waiters moving quietly among the tables aren't in any way like the Springs or the lane winding past dead apple trees. But, even as I sit here, I'm back among golden leaves sifting onto unkempt grass.

They tell me Anson's trial won't come off till next term of court, to go ahead on this Argentine trip, take pictures, get it out of my mind.

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I'll have to go back when he comes to trial. I only wish I didn't have to go through it all again. It's bad enough for me but what will it be for Dana? They say my flash picture coupled with her testimony are the things that will convict him—if anything can convict a Metcalf in that country.

I keep seeing Dana's face as the State Police led Anson away. And her hands trying to smooth Tundra's feathers while she pleaded with the corporal to let her bury the eagle after they were through with it. All along I keep seeing her.

"This girl I was telling you about—" The wicker chair arms under my elbows feel unreal leaning forward across the table. "Leaving her standing there by that boxwood, so unsmiling and alone, was the hardest thing I've ever done. If she'd waved, or smiled just once, or—well, I guess I couldn't have expected her to give me the kind of look I've seen her give that falcon. Or rather, tercel.

"I left more of me at that old house than I knew. On my way to the Springs that day after it was over, I stopped the Jaguar and looked back. I knew then that the rest of the world would always seem unfinished as long as that girl was back there, not with me."

The smile on my luncheon date across the table could be amused, or even skeptical.

"It's true. I should have known before, but that day, looking back at the mountain shutting me away from her, I realized what she meant to me. How empty all those little things would seem, from here on, without her—things I'd always held important, even before I'd found her to give them meaning. It would be like trying to go on with more than half of me cut away. I knew then I'd go back. It will be wonderful in those mountains, always—with her."

"This cruise tomorrow—this new assignment. You're sure all this won't change your mind, Grat? You think you'll still feel that way about those mountains? And that—that peculiar girl?"

"There'll be these trips, certainly, from time to time. But they'll be just interludes for us in our life in the mountains. Do you think you're going to like it, Dana?"

Her fingers reaching over to me are cool and firm around mine and now I know how Butcher Boy feels when she looks at him like that.

The April issue of Mercury Mystery Magazine will feature "The Real Gone Goose," a mystery novel by George Bagby. When Inspector "Schmitty" bumps into murder among the beat generation, anything can happen—and does. Look for the new Mercury Mystery on your newsstand.

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I crouched in the drafty shed clenching the big .45.
Robinson had robbed me of eight years, but
the two-bit hero was going to pay with his life . . .

NEVER LOOK BACK

by Avram Davidson and Chester Cohen

MIKE SAT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF the double glass between us. There was a thing we could speak through. I remembered when it used to be wire-mesh. You couldn't see the faces so clear, but that was all right: a sharp guy could get things through the mesh no matter how many screws were looking at him. And then they had to spoil it. Always somebody trying to make it tougher for somebody else. Well, the Hell with them. With everybody. Except Mike. He was okay. He was the only friend I had.

And it was only a few days since I got *out* of jail. I almost had to laugh when I thought of it. I must be getting old, losing my touch, I thought. Seeing Mike made me remember—No. I'd be out again soon. Real soon. And I'd never be in again.

"I'm sorry to see you here, Frank," he said, sadly. Mike was always sad. He was the kind of guy that dogs followed home. It's a pretty rotten world (I thought), but as long as there were guys like him in it, you knew it wasn't a hundred percent rotten.

"Mike," I said, "how soon can you get me out of here?"

It was Monday morning that they gave me the new suit, the fifty dollars, and the railroad ticket. The scenery coming down on the train didn't interest me, and nobody on the train did, either. I never cared for trains, anyway. A sharp guy drives a sharp car. Trains? For squares. Dopes. Suckers. And for people that get lousy breaks and have to take rides at the taxpayers' expense. And what a lousy break *I'd* had! Not that I believe in thinking too much about the past. "Never look back," is my motto. It was only this old pappy-guy punching the tickets, made me think of that night at the mill. The watchman was an old guy, too. Blood all over him . . .

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From the terminal I walked over to midtown and stood on a street corner there for almost an hour looking at all the broads. It was too damned long since I'd seen anybody but cons and screws. The new dress styles were supposed to be loose, but there were enough dolls paying no attention to the mode, to give me a charge. A goodlooking babe in a tight dress is sure something to make the eyes happy.

Naturally, I started thinking right away about Rochelle. I'd been thinking about her for years, so it came easy. Now there was a mouse that had everything but brains. And who wants a mouse to have brains? I had enough for the two of us, with lots left over. I've *got* to latch on to that little gal again.

But first that Robinson business. I didn't want any slip-ups, and a dame can make you get real careless.

Finally, after I took the edge off of my appetite for just *seeing* dames again, I turned uptown and started walking. Man! it was good to be on the outside again. No screws forever watching you, no stupid cons, no locks, no bars —and no damned *walls!*

Waiting for a light to change, I took a deep breath and looked around at the world. The outside. Where they didn't lock you in at nine at night. Where there was more than one kind of clothes. It felt good. It was a honey of a day, too. A little cloudy, but you could smell spring in the air. Things were shaping up right for me for a change.

They had a new traffic gimmick —signs that lit up and told you WALK and DON'T WALK. I didn't flip over it, it was too much like Inside. But I waited like a good boy and when the sign said WALK, I went across the street to a corner cigar store. I bought a pack of butts (no more lousy roll-your-owns!) and took my change to a phone booth in the back. Nice day or rotten day, I had something I had to do. It had been writing a long time, but it wasn't too late. At least, I hoped it wasn't.

Joe Gordon's hamhock arms were planted on the table in a back booth at Mulloy's. He was the same big, red-faced slob as always, with his fat lips wrapped around a fifty cent cigar. When I came up, he held up a hand that looked like a catcher's mitt. Mine got lost in it. "How's it been, Joe," I asked, after I gave him the chance to ask *me* and he didn't take it.

"Can't complain, Frank." He sure looked as if he wasn't suffering much in the new sharkskin suit he was wearing. Must've cost him two hundred dollars. Of course, on him it looked like an expensive tent. The tailor could've made me two out of it. Fat slob

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Joe had been doing all right while I was away. He always knew how to figure the angles. Nothing ever got past him. *I* knew that. Well, you couldn't blame me for trying. And anyway, it was a long time ago.

Why should he complain? That was some break he got, inheriting Bonetty's racket when Boney got fingered. Why the devil didn't Boney give *me* a piece of it, at least? I helped him plenty in the old days. It was a good thing for me nobody ever found out *who* fingered him! But that's the way it goes—*some guys* get the breaks, some guys don't. I don't.

"Siddown," Joe said. The table was pushed so far over towards the seat opposite him to make room for his fat gut that I could hardly squeeze in. "What'll you have?" he asked.

"Rye." I lit a cigarette, watching him as he signaled the bartender. He acted like he owned the joint. What a character—I felt like I wanted to push his face in, just on general principles.

"I got your message, Frank," he went on. "You want a roll and a rod, huh?" I nodded. "And as soon as you take care of some personal business, you'll start in to work for me and take orders like a good boy from now on, huh?" I smiled and said, Sure. In a pig's eye I would. I had *enough* of taking orders. Eight years worth, on this last rap alone.

The bartender brought two shots of rye. Joe took the cigar out of his fat mouth, swallowed half the whisky, and put the cigar back in. He sat there chewing it for a while without saying anything. Then, finally, he shifted the cigar to the other side of his mouth. "I can let you have a hundred on account. No more."

Generous of him. The big—. "It'll do," I said. Joe's pocket hadn't loosened up any while I was in stir. "That takes care of the roll," I said, taking it under the table. "Thanks," I added. The word didn't come easy. "Now how about the rod?"

"You'll get it." He took the cigar out of his mouth and pointed it at me. "Don't pull another goof, Frank. I can't use goof-offs."

I told him I had this one figured. He grunted. "Like last time?" That got my juice up. I finished my drink and slid out of the booth. "Gotta get moving," I said. "When do I get the rod?"

"Tomorrow. See you at my place, around noon time."

I told him I'd be there. Then I left. The phone book said Rochelle was living not far from her old place. I figured I'd surprise her. Thinking about Rochelle put a sappy smile on my face. And just then I ran into Mike.

Old Mike. I guess he's no older than I am, but he acts like he's everybody's grandfather, particularly mine. If he stood up straight

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he'd be tall, but he stoops, and he peers, and he worries. "Frank, why don't you get a regular job and settle down," he'd say to me. Stuff like that. And he'd send me spending money and little things when I was up. Who was the only guy who wrote to me? Mike.

"Where you going now, Frank?" he said, after he'd pumped my hand and slapped my back and told me I was looking good and asked me did I need any money. "Why don't you have something to eat with me?"

"Thanks, Mike, but I want to see another old friend. Rochelle." Yeah, I know she never wrote to me, but for all I know, the mouse can't write. Mike started to speak. I could see him swallow whatever it was he was going to say. Then he started to shake his head. "Be better if you'd stay away from her, Frank. That was never any good for either of you."

I said, "It'll be all right, Mike?" I needed his advice about *dames? Mike's?* A laugh if there ever was one. But he kept right on. "Honest, Frank, I mean it. Please stay away from her." I punched him lightly in the shoulder. "It'll be okay, Mike. See you around real soon." And I walked away.

Rochelle lived in one of those new buildings that had sprung up all over town while I was away. Not real ritzy, but plenty high class just the same. Coming up in the elevator I kept thinking about Rochelle. She was fun from the beginning . . . okay, so I punched her around now and then. Nothing wrong with that. Keeps a babe on her toes. Alert. They really like it, anyway, even if they carry on. It was the kind-hearted saps like Mike that got left behind.

Her apartment was at the end of the hall. There was a peep-hole in the door. I felt like smashing the thing. I hated peep-holes, they reminded me of the hole—solitary. Well, never mind that. Never look back . . . I knuckled the door.

After a while I heard heels tapping. Then the peep-hole showed a light. My heart started thumping like crazy when the double lock snapped. I stood there cursing myself as the door opened. She was standing there, looking up at me with that funny little smile on her face I'd remembered all the time I was in the freezer. Sure—she'd gotten older, put on weight—but I didn't care. I didn't care one little bit.

She stared at me for a minute. Then she whispered, "Frank!"

"You guessed it," I said. Then I took her in my arms and put eight years behind bars into that kiss. When I let her go she looked at me with big dog-eyes. I let the door slam shut and locked it. "Frank, I—Frank—" She started to say something, but I kissed her

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again. Then I looked over the joint. Not a bad set-up at all. Rochelle hadn't dreamed this up by herself. A lot of dough had gone through some decorator's hands to fix the place up that good. And where did *she* get so much dough? Well, never mind, I'd find out sooner or later. "Babe," I said, "I think I'm going to like it here."

Her face changed. She got that stubborn look on it again—I knew that look. "No," she said. I asked, "What do you mean, telling me 'No'?" She looked at me with her face set. "I mean that you can't move in here, Frank." So that was it. Go away for a little while, and boy! how quick they forget you! So that's where the money came from—

I started to burn. "What's his name?" I sneered. She went red at that. "It's not what you think . . . he doesn't live here now. He won't until we're married." *Married!* Here I'd dreamed about this babe for eight years. I'd loved her. And now, suddenly, it all changed. I got crazy-mad. I felt like killing her, and shoved her away so hard that she almost fell over.

"You rotten, two-timing chippy!" I yelled. But she didn't back down, just stood there with that stubborn puss on her, so I slapped her across it. She staggered back with her hand to her face. That was the way to handle this babe. It always was. Then she'd be all right again. She'd be the way *I* wanted her to be again . . . Only this time it didn't seem to be working.

She said, in a funny little voice, "You'll be sorry you did that, Frank." Then she made a real speech. "You spoil everything you ever touch," she said. "You ruin it—break it, smash it. You double-crossed every friend you ever had, except Mike. And now you're starting in with me again. You'll be sorry . . ."

"Ah, no, Babe," I told her. "I'm never sorry. 'Never look back' is my motto, remember? Now listen. I got some unfinished business to take care off. Maybe you can guess what it is. After that's done with, I'll be back. Meanwhile—get rid of your boy-friend."

She said, quietly, "I can't get rid of him, Frank. Listen, Frank—"

Then I got this sudden idea. "Hey! Is it *Joe?*" I snapped. He always had an eye for Rochelle when she walked by. Of course, I never figured him for the marrying kind, but still—if it was Joe, that was different. I didn't want any trouble with him. I'd have to be careful, very careful.

Not that I'd give Rochelle up, you understand. I'd just be careful.

"It's not Joe," she said. I laughed, then. Who else did I have to be afraid of? "Well, who-

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ever it is: give him the brush. You aren't marrying anybody," I said. "Not even me." I walked out on that line.

Well, I had a small time big time that night with the State's $50 and Joe's hundred. It helped to start taking the edge off of what had been saved up for eight years. Then there was the main thing that had been saved up—my "personal business". At about 11:30 next day I showed up at Joe's. Now *there* was a real cool pad, nothing like Rochelle's. I mean, *really* big time. "You're early, Frank," he said, closing the door.

"Yeah, I want to get moving," I told him, "All set?"

"Sure," he said. We went into the living room and he eased himself into a big armchair. Then he took out a cigar and bit off the end. I fell into some kind of thing that looked like a big shell and waited for him to light up. Some mouse came in with drinks on a tray. I didn't know her—but I figured I might get to. Joe and I took up our glasses, and the mouse sat down on the couch, making a big deal about pulling her dress over her knees.

Joe said one word: "Blow!" The babe's mouth opened, but she didn't say a word, just got up and stamped out of the room. Joe had been watching the two of us like a hawk. That's the kind of Rochelle for one.

slob he is, never trusts anyone. He took a long pull on his drink and put the glass on a little table in front of his chair. Reaching into a pocket of his jacket, he fished out a package and tossed it over to me.

I tore off the brown paper and whistled. It was a brand-new .45. "Now be careful, Frank," Joe said, jabbing a finger like a knackwurst at me. "I got plans for you, soon as you're ready to go back to work." I told him not to worry, that everything was under control. "How long you figure this—uh—'personal business' is going to take?" he asked. I shrugged, told him a couple of days, maybe—it depended. And I stood up and put the gun in my pocket.

Joe heaved himself out of the easy chair and followed me to the door. "Thanks," I said. See you soon." The door closed and I heard the lock snap behind me, and somehow I didn't like the sound.

The rain was hitting the roof of the shed like buckshot. And it was cold. Boy, it sure gets cold out in the suburbs. I hunched myself back in the corner to get out of the draft from the broken door and lit another cigarette.

Damn! Weren't the two of them ever coming home? I wanted to finish the job and get *out* of there. I had things to do.

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I sat there in the dark, staring at the end of my cigarette, feeling real disgusted. Nothing ever seemed to work out right for me. A rotten long time I'd waited for this night, so it has to blow up a storm. If only that lousy wind would let up.

Rotten luck—I've always had rotten luck. Some guys get a break at least *once in a while.* Some guys have lots of friends who don't let them down. Not me. It's always got to be the hard way for me.

Like that deal at the mill. Three months I worked there, like a slave, pushing those big heavy rolls of paper around. Studying the set-up, learning the routine of the place, planning every little detail for a perfect job. And then it came time to pull it off. I picked Thanksgiving. What could be a better time? — everybody home stuffing their guts with turkey. Only the old watchman to take care of.

And my timing was perfect. The old jerk was making his stupid rounds, punching those little boxes with his key.

I waited till he was off in the west wing before I got to work. Played it safe. The door to the main office was no problem. But the safe was tough. I thought I was going to have to give it up and come back and try to blow it. Then I suddenly got the feel, and I knew I had it licked.

Wow! I pretty near flipped when I saw all those pretty green engravings! That satchel I brought didn't look near big enough to hold it all. Maybe I'd have to stuff some inside my shirt.

But I didn't have much time to worry about that because just then I heard the old man coming back. He was supposed to go on up to the *next* floor. What the blazes was the matter with him?

Well, at the trial it came out that he wanted a drink of water and the water fountain upstairs was on the bum. Drink of water, my foot! He probably had a bottle stashed away in the toilet. But they brought in some so-called "testimony" that they claimed the old man had given at the hospital. And they *believed* crud like that! Why, the old man couldn't have told the time of day, the condition he was in.

So he came staggering back down the hall that night, and I guess he'd had a couple of drinks. Anyway, he was talking to himself. Maybe he had a bottle stashed on every floor. Soon as I heard this gooney-bird coming back, I took a quick look around to be sure I had everything squared away.

And I *didn't* have! What a dumb goof I pulled! The damned door wasn't closed all the way. How the devil I missed that, I don't know to this day. But anyhow, I dropped everything and

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ducked behind the door. I took out my sap and waited.

Sure enough, old pappy saw that the door wasn't closed, and he had to stick his red nose in for a look-see. Well, he didn't see much. He never knew what hit him. Man, talk about blood!

Now, I figure I'd better take off. I've got enough loot to keep me busy for a long time, so why be greedy?

But just as I was set to walk out, pretty as you please, with my nice heavy satchel and my pockets and shirts filled, somebody stuck his nose out of an office at the end of the hall. Wouldn't you know it—Eager Beaver Robinson, the accountant, working on Thanksgiving.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Where's Old Jim?"

Well, I didn't figure I was going to win any money by staying to answer, so I just took off like a big bird. But I slipped going around the corner to the stairs. The satchel went flying one way and I went the other, head over heels down the whole flight of stairs. Still, even though I suddenly decided not to go back for the satchel, I was up and out the fire door before Robinson could even get near me.

But that didn't stop him from identifying me in court. Eyes like a lousy, sneaky cat, I suppose—why, there wasn't enough light on that stairway to recognize your own mother. But a guy like that, perjury doesn't bother him one little bit.

So Robinson, a small-time palooka, got to be big-time for a few weeks, got to be a hero, by putting the finger on me. If there's one thing I hate, it's a stoolie. I should've gone back and killed him right there in the mill, and saved myself eight years in jail.

Well, I'd take care of that little mistake real soon now. Nobody told Robinson to be a hero—he could've said the light was bad, he wasn't sure—I patted the gun in my pocket and lit another cigarette.

An hour and a half I waited in that rotten little shack. I don't know how the building department can allow it—inspectors take graft, I suppose—shacks like that. I was chilled to the marrows. The wind dropped a little, but the rain still came down in sheets. I got up to stretch my legs a little. Then I heard a car turn off the main road and into the bumpy little street in front of the house. I flipped my cigarette into the rain and watched it hiss out.

Just like that, is how it's going to be for you, Robinson. Pfftt!—and you'll pay for eight years you took out of my life . . .

The car pulled into the driveway. I put my hand on my gun. It felt cold as ice. I flipped the safety off and waited. The car

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was rolling into the garage now. Soon as Mr. Eager B. Robinson came out, I'd let him have it in the back. I was plenty sore after waiting in the cold so long.

The car doors slammed. I slipped the rod out. Then I heard this other voice. A woman! Hell, I'd forgotten about his wife. Well, let her keep clear, or she'd get what her husband got for not keeping clear in the first place. I waited till they were inside the house. Then I went across the lawn and up the porch steps. I had the lock picked and the door open in a minute or so.

I eased into the kitchen, took out the .45, and catfooted into the dining room. It was dark there, so I could take my time casing the set-up in the front room. Robinson was sitting in the armchair with a drink in his hand—a hot toddy, I could see the steam curling, smell the spices. These eight years—they'd been soft for him. He looked a lot older, hair all gone grey, but his face was still the same ugly face I used to see in my dreams, up in the freezer . . . *Of course I am certain that this is the man . . . Oh, no, I could not be mistaken . . .*

I started down the side of the room toward the French doors.

Then the bloody phone rang.

I froze and watched Robinson go up to answer it. The damn thing must have been out in the front hall, because I couldn't hear what he was saying. Then—instead of coming back, he rummaged around in a closet or something, mumbling to himself. Finally he started back, and I figured I'd stalled around long enough. Quick-like, I walked in through the open French doors – and Robinson stopped dead in the doorway to the hall.

He didn't make a sound, but his face turned yellow. He sure made a pretty picture, framed in the doorway, and perfect target, too. But I wanted to play with him a little, first.

"Hello, rat," I said, and I gave him the small laugh.

Chicken-liver couldn't even talk, just started putting his hands up. And all the time he kept looking at the gun, scared witless. Then, the next thing I knew, one of his hands jerked a little, and all the lights went out. Damn him! He was right next to a switch!

The sudden dark left me blind as a bat, but I quick fired one shot. Right away I knew I'd missed him, because I could hear him scraping along the floor on my left somewhere. I tried another shot at the noise, and again it was no good. But I wasn't worried because I figured I'd get him sooner or later.

Then the mouse upstairs started hollering, "Bob, Bob, what's happening?"

"Don't come down! You'll be killed!" Robinson yelled back. His

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voice was coming from the other side of the room, and I fired in that direction, but I couldn't see a thing.

Then I cursed myself. Why, sure! All I had to do was feel my way back to the light switch and put the lights on, and Robinson would be a sitting duck.

So I was easing my way back towards the archway when a gun went off behind me, and it was like a horse kicked me in the shoulder. I spilled onto the floor and my gun went skidding away. My head started to go around and round like a Ferris wheel. The rat had me beat all to Hell in the dark with his owl's eyes. It wasn't fair.

Then the lights went on again and Robinson was standing there with a gun on me. I could see he was scared stiff, still. His hand was shaking like he had the DTs. Where in Hell did he get the rod? Did he always pack one?

He backed away a little and called up the stairs, "Leona, you can come down now. I've got him. Come and call the police."

"Mike, you can bail me out," I pleaded. "You know all the bondsmen. You know the lawyers, the judges even like you and trust you. Get them to reduce the charge. Tell them I'll cop a plea." He looked at me with those sad, sad eyes. "This attempted murder rap is silly," I told him. Just looking at him, I felt my confidence come back. I could always get around Mike. "I only fired in self-defense. You can get the charge reduced to breaking and entering or something like that. Then the bail will be low. Get me out on bail, Mike."

Get me out. That's all. Once out. I'd take care of Rat Robinson if I had to use a knife, a club, or a little girl's jumping rope to do it. This time I wouldn't fail. And then I'd get away so quick and so far they'd never catch up with me. In Mexico I'd pick up some phoney papers and head for South America. They don't even know what time of day it is down there; a sharp guy can always—Mike would forfeit his bail, of course, but that was too bad, there was no other way, I couldn't worry about that. Once away, I'd never look back.

"How about it, Mike? Mike, for the love of—"

He looked at me, still sad. "You should've listened to me, Frank," he said. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from Rochelle?"

Rochelle. Maybe I'd take her with me. She wouldn't want to leave her nice apartment, but she'd go if I made her. "Rochelle? What does she have to do with it, Mike?"

"Who do you think tipped off Robinson?" he asked. Then the light bulb went on in my head. So that was it. The phone call

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while I was waiting—*that's* why Robinson had the rod: he'd been warned, he got it out of the closet before he walked in. *Rochelle.* I wouldn't've believed it, but I had to credit Mike. Guess she sure had a big beef about my taking over again, belting her around—Well. That made two to take care of. But first I had to get *out.*

"Yeah, Mike," I said. "You were right. Well, I'll sure stay away from her from now on. Even if she did turn me in, I'll never see her again."

"You'll never see her again," he agreed. "This is your fourth offense. You're going to be sent up for good this time. Frank."

"Ah, *no,* Mike. Not if I get a good lawyer. I can beat the rap—but you'll have to help me. You're my only friend, Mike."

He went on like he didn't hear me. "You'll never see her again . . . But it wasn't Rochelle who turned you in, Frank. It was me. Rochelle is *my* girl now, Frank. We're going to be married. I told you to stay away from her. I *begged* you. You should've listened." He got up. "You haven't any more friends, Frank. Maybe you'll make some where you're going. I doubt it—but you've got a lot of time to try."

He walked away and he never looked back.

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Alice Robbins was a sweet young thing with everything to live for—but she killed herself when her boss left town with a $10,000 necklace that wasn't his.... Big Bill Johnson figured he'd just have to find the guy and pin it on him—which proved surprisingly difficult.

Account Settled

by Robert Zacks

BIG BILL JOHNSON HAD ONE GREAT pride that made up for his being a stout man that people grinned at—he was the best bill collector the Acme Collection Agency had ever hired. As a collector of purchased delinquent accounts, he was too big to throw out, too patient to be insulted, and could dig up a fact like a long-nosed anteater tearing a colony of termites from the ground.

Usually jovial, he was now deeply worried.

"Boss," he said to Doc Watson, the agency head, "this is a tough one. I'm getting nowhere."

Doc Watson was the right man for this business. He'd been a reporter, a private detective, an insurance investigator, and had ended up here in his own business. And doing very well, too. The Acme Agency bought apparently hopeless accounts for ridiculously low sums, and gambled on its skill in collecting. One collection sometimes gave a lovely profit on two months' purchases.

Doc Watson pulled a folder out of the files and read it aloud rapidly. "Account #293; debtor Randall Craig; item defaulted on: one pearl necklace bought for ten thousand dollars; overdue three months."

He frowned. "Why don't you bring the file up to date?"

Big Bill Johnson grunted. "Been chasing around too much. Craig's been buying jewelry regularly at Universal, always on thirty-days credit and always paying on time. Got a good credit rating in the advertising business with his own small agency—though he doesn't seem to do much business."

"Should be a cinch," said Dr. Watson reproachfully. "He's got an address, customers and probably a secretary. Buy her a dinner or a bottle of perfume. She'll talk her head off."

"She killed herself last week," Johnson said glumly. "No suicide

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note. Name's Alice Robbins. Lived alone in New York, didn't seem to have any friends. . . . And there's no assets to attach, either—he drew all the cash out of the bank and our claim comes after business creditors. We couldn't get a nickel out of an attachment."

Doc Watson nodded. "Who'd he get all the jewelry for? Did you question the janitor? How about. . . ."

Johnson interrupted aggrievedly, "Yeah, yeah. Nobody knows a thing. Every one of his customers clams up when I come in. Nobody heard where he was planning to go or made ticket reservations for him."

"Except his secretary and she's dead," said Doc Watson thoughtfully. "You sure it was suicide?"

"No question about it. You know those headquarters boys. They're good."

Doc Watson nodded. He drumed his fingers on the desk in annoyance. "If we catch up with this guy and squeeze the ten thousand out of him, we make ninety-five hundred dollars profit," he growled. "Two thousand for you, seventy-five hundred for me."

Johnson sighed. "Don't I know it!"

"Jewelry means one thing," mused Doc Watson. "Women. Probably made a pass at that secretary. She's the best lead. See if you can pick up a family address on her. Search her apartment . . ."

Johnson said suddenly, "If he's a ladies' man, he must've been known in the nightspots. I'll try the gossip columnists." He heaved himself up and reached for his hat.

"I'll get something to eat," he said thoughtfully. "Then I'll pick up the secretary's address from McGillicudy at the Fifth Precinct. He owes me a favor."

Doc chuckled wryly. "Who doesn't?" he said.

McGillicudy was as big as Big Bill, but there was no fat and his face was no round moon. He looked like what he was—a tough, good cop.

"We got her effects," said McGillicudy, swinging his stick expertly. "So what's the use of goin' down to her place?"

"You never can tell," said Big Bill apologetically. "You fellows sure it was suicide?"

McGillicudy shrugged. "We got experts. So they say."

"No suicide note is funny," said Big Bill.

McGillicudy shook his head. "I guess she just didn't have anybody to leave a note to. The landlady didn't know a thing about her. We're clearing her fingerprints with Washington to locate possible relatives."

"How about her boss, Craig? Have you located him yet?"

"We're in a funny position,"

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said McGillicudy. "As far as we're concerned it's suicide without question. He's got a right to disappear if he wants to. It's a free country."

"I've got to find him," said Big Bill sadly. "I got to collect a bill from him."

Johnson went to the apartment Alice Robbins had lived in and rang the bell. The landlady who opened the door was a thin, overworked, nervous woman with hair like a wet mop.

"I don't know nothin' about nothin'," she said promptly and shrilly. "I run a respectable place. I . . ."

"Where'd she come from?" asked Big Bill. "Don't tell me you let her in without references. Any respectable place on this block asks references of young ladies."

The landlady faltered. "I already told the police I don't . . ."

She stopped and stared at the five dollar bill Johnson was creasing with his fingers.

"Ain't you from the police?" she demanded, indignantly.

"I'm a private investigator," said Big Bill sternly. "The police didn't finish here yet, you know. They might come back. Do you want this or do you want them to come back?"

The landlady snatched the five dollars and put it into an apron pocket.

"I just didn't want any trouble," said the landlady nervously.

Johnson looked at the slip of paper the landlady showed him. Her hand shook as he read the name of a minister in a small town, The Reverend Smith of the town of Waldemere in a western state.

"Nervous, aren't you," said Bill placidly.

"I am not," she said her voice rising. "Why should I be?"

"Maybe," said Big Bill dreamily, "maybe you're afraid I'll find out she brought money with her. I understand you found the body. Maybe you searched the apartment before you called the police and . . ."

Suddenly the landlady tried to slam the door, but Big Bill got his foot in the way. "It's a lie," she gasped. "I didn't find any money."

Big Bill said calmly. "I'd like some more information out of you. Did a fellow by the name of Craig ever come up to see Alice Robbins?"

By the time Big Bill Johnson left the frightened landlady, he knew Alice Robbins had loved her boss, that he'd taken her out often, that Mr. Craig was a tall, thin, good-looking man with brilliant, dark eyes and a sardonic smile. He also had a voice like a radio announcer, smooth and pleasant to the ear, and Alice had confided to the landlady that Craig always wore gloves to hide the fact that the first joint of the

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little finger of his left hand was missing. Craig had explained to Alice that no girl had been willing to marry a man with the little finger so mutilated. Alice didn't feel that way.

Big Bill then went down to the columnists' hangout, Joe's Steak House. When his eyes adjusted to the semi-gloom and indirect lighting he saw Carruthers of the Gazette at the bar. Carruthers, small and egotistical, was a good friend of Bill's.

"Hiya, you tub of lard," he said to Big Bill. "Have a keg of beer on me."

Bill leaned with relief on the bar.

"You shrimp," he said. "You're built just right for a keyhole peeper."

Carruthers grinned. "What have you got for me, pal?" he asked in a kindly tone.

Big Bill knew business was business. He proceeded to shell out with some intimate facts he'd saved for just such a deal. A juicy bit about a play producer and a leading lady; a tidbit about a Personage registered incognito at a leading hotel and why he was in town.

"Nice," sighed Carruthers. "Nice. Billy boy, why don't you write my column for me? It would save me lots of work."

"I'm not sufficiently illiterate," said Big Bill solemnly. "Now, you tell me. There's a guy named Randall Craig who's disappeared with a ten-thousand buck necklace."

"The gentleman is known to me," said Carruthers drily. "Why do you want him?"

"I just told you," said Big Bill steadily. "He owes us ten thou—"

"Well," said Carruthers, "if that's all it is, I'd advise you to forget it. This guy is deadly. His advertising agency is a front—his business is blackmail. And I mean blackmail. He uses faked photographs, and if he gets something real on you he'll use it too."

"Well," said Big Bill, his eyes round. "What do you know about that? He must do pretty well to be able to buy all that jewelry."

Carruthers said contemptuously, "You don't think a rat like that would give expensive jewelry away, do you? He uses it to cover the payoff. He sells a five-thousand dollar bracelet to the victim for twenty-five thousand, say. He even gives a bill of sale—everything nice and legal. You can't pin him with marked money, because he's only selling you jewelry. What's more, he even pays an income tax on it."

Big Bill said happily, "Guess he can afford to pay us for the necklace then. When I find him."

"Listen," said Carruthers quietly. "He used to lose every nickel gambling, and he probably left town because he needs money. Everybody in New York was wise

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to him—we passed the word."

"You seem to know a lot about it," said Big Bill.

"I read in the papers that his secretary knocked herself off," said Carruthers seriously. "He was a prize heel with women and in my business that sort comes to my attention."

"D'ya think maybe she was murdered?"

Carruthers shrugged. "If the police say it's suicide, I'm satisfied."

Big Bill Johnson nodded thoughtfully. He'd learned a lot . . . but that girl was still his only lead. . . .

It was a long dull train ride to the dead girl's hometown, and Big Bill slept most of the way. Waldemere turned out to be a lovely little collection of country cottages nestled in a valley that was a vacationers' heaven, and the home of the Reverend Smith had an open-door hospitality about it. The Reverend was a kindly, loquacious man with graying hair. He'd heard about Alice Robbins' death, it turned out.

"I read about it in the papers," he said. He shook his head, and sighed. "I tried to dissuade her from leaving here, but she had a taste for bright lights. It was that girl Sybil Lord that influenced her, unfortunately. It was too bad Alice had no folks, else it wouldn't have happened."

"Who's Sybil Lord?"

Reverend Smith hesitated. "Are you from the police?" he asked.

"No," admitted Big Bill. "I'm a private investigator."

Reverend Smith smiled faintly. "I'm sorry. I can't discuss the matter further."

Big Bill sighed and heaved himself up. "O.K., Reverend," he grinned. "You got an awful lot of ethics on your hands, I guess."

It wasn't hard to check on Sybil Lord and Alice Robbins. The town was aware of her death, and the men in the local bar were mostly townspeople who made their livings out of the summer vacationists. Their main subject of conversation was the doings of their customers, and the name of Sybil Lord brought forth a flood of reminiscing. Big Bill bought beers for everybody and placidly collected the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

Then he reported to Doc Watson by long distance telephone.

"This Sybil Lord is one of those wild kids," he said. "Papa Lord is a wealthy Chicago surgeon. Sybil came down from Chicago for the summer because Papa figured it was a quiet place and she couldn't get into as much trouble here as she could in Chicago. Alice Robbins was an orphan and poor. Alice helped Sybil spend her money. Probably the first good time Alice ever had in her life. Made her yearn for the big city."

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"O.K.," said Doc Watson impatiently. "So we know why Alice came to New York. So what?"

"Take it easy," said Big Bill amiably, into the mouthpiece. "I got more. Papa Lord is a widower and too busy being famous to bring Sybil up right. Boy, she must have exploded right in his face. She got mixed up in some kind of messy affair down here, and got dragged away by Papa, who hushed up the whole thing. If it's as bad as they say, it could hurt his practice."

Doc Watson finished it quickly: "Alice then leaves the old home town for the bright lights and gets a job with Randall Craig. She falls for him and innocently spills the whole thing. Then she finds Craig is a blackmailer. She must have been a sensitive kid to knock herself off."

"Small town girl," intoned Big Bill Johnson. "Too many things happening to her. I'm getting right up to Chicago."

"Wait," hollered Doc Watson. "You got identification on Craig?"

"Yep," said Big Bill cheerfully. "The first joint of the little finger of his left hand is missing . . . He always wears gloves to cover it. There was a guy here two weeks ago. His hair was blond, not black, and he wore glasses and a mustache, but a bellboy in the hotel says he never took his gloves off, and he was asking questions about Sybil Lord."

"Dyed his hair of course," said Doc Watson. "But why? Why should he dye his hair? The police weren't after him."

"No," said Big Bill thoughtfully. "But he still hasn't paid for that necklace, and he needs it for his crooked deal. Of course, could be somebody else with blond hair is interested in Sybil Lord."

"By George," said Doc Watson, "he'll milk that surgeon Dr. Lord like you milk a cow.'

"I'm grabbing the first train tonight," said Big Bill.

In Chicago next morning, Big Bill found in the directory only one Dr. Lord with the right initial, and Big Bill went up to his office. It was in an enormous apartment-hotel building in an expensive district. The furnishings were rich looking. The receptionist-nurse at the desk smiled at him faintly.

"Some class," said Big Bill respectfully. "The doctor does all right, hey?"

The nurse laughed. "May I help you? Do you wish an appointment?"

"Well now, I don't know," said Big Bill genially. "My name is Bill Johnson. My secretary was supposed to have made an appointment for me. I'm kind of afraid of doctors, myself. If he didn't make an appointment yet I'd just as soon put this off for a while."

"Dr. Lord is a splendid sur-

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geon," smiled the nurse. "He has an international reputation. You need have no fear of entrusting yourself to his care."

"Did my secretary make the appointment?" said Big Bill doubtfully. "His name is Randall Craig. He's blond. Got a blond mustache and wears eyeglasses. And gloves."

The nurse checked the appointment book with a frown. "I don't understand it," she said. "What day did your secretary say you had . . ."

"Haven't seen him for a couple of days," said Big Bill calmly. "Been out of town. That's all right, he probably didn't make the appointment."

"But I remember him," said the nurse squinting her eyes. "A man with blond hair, mustache, and eyeglasses. And the gloves. He was here last week. But what I don't understand is, he didn't make an appointment for you and his name wasn't Craig. It was Forrest. He wanted to see the Doctor about a personal matter. He was very insistent that it was personal. I don't understand what . . ."

"Did he come back again?" asked Big Bill, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"He left after half an hour. I didn't see him again, no. I'm sorry if . . ."

Big Bill waved his hand expansively. "Forget it. As a matter of fact I'm relieved. I'm afraid of an operation. It's my wife's idea anyway."

Big Bill finally escaped, went down, surveyed the floor arrangements of the doctor's building and set himself to watch the doctor's office like a hawk watching a chicken coop.

Two days passed. No man with gloves walked in or out of the building. Johnson fretted and phoned Watson.

"No," said Watson positively. "Craig would have come back to New York and paid for the necklace out of the payoff. They're probably still dickering. Can you talk to Doctor Lord?"

"I'll develop a brain tumor," said Big Bill.

When Big Bill Johnson finally was admitted to Dr. Lord's office, he was more confused than ever. Dr. Lord was a gentle-faced tired looking man. His eyes were kind and shrewd. He felt Johnson's head with light fingers, took X-rays and asked questions.

"When did your head begin aching?" he asked.

Johnson looked at him mildly. "When I couldn't figure out," he said, "what happened to the necklace."

Imperceptibly, the doctor's face changed. It got harder. His hands dropped to his sides. He looked at Johnson.

"What necklace?" he said carefully.

"Fellow by the name of Craig

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got a necklace he didn't pay for. Back in New York City," said Johnson. "I'm looking for him."

There was no question about it. Dr. Lord's face turned a muddy pale. For a split second his eyes flickered to a small drawer in the file cabinet near the window. Big Bill Johnson knew placidly he was close to triumph.

"Pardon me," Lord said. "The door is open."

As he went to close the door, Johnson quickly stepped forward to the cabinet and opened it. To his vast disappointment, there was no necklace there. The drawer was filled with bone specimens, of the type used in medical school anatomy classes.

Johnson's moon face showed no emotion as he picked up the skeleton of a hand with the first joint of the little finger missing. Behind him the doctor drew in a long, gasping breath. Johnson put the specimen down and turned.

"Interesting, aren't they?" The doctor's eyes bored feverishly into Big Bill's. "I use them for teaching at the institute."

"Yeh," said Johnson, with a vacuous expression. "Look, Doc, I'm a collector. This guy Craig has been selling necklaces he hasn't paid for. He's a crook and a louse. All we want is our necklace back, see? We won't press charges against Craig if we get it. Have you bought a necklace from him?"

"Yes," whispered the doctor. "I haven't paid for it yet."

With shaking hands he took a small jewel box out of a drawer and gave it to Johnson.

"Thanks, Doc. Here's our card," said Johnson amiably as he noticed Dr. Lord smoothly reaching into the desk drawer for something out of sight. "If this guy Craig hollers, you refer him to us. The dirty crook!"

Dr. Lord stopped reaching. His hand came out of the drawer empty. He looked at Big Bill with pain-filled eyes, and in them was a flicker of hope, a moment of indecision.

In that one moment of hesitation Big Bill made the door, unlocked it and threw it wide open.

"I'm sorry as hell, Doc," he said feelingly. "I'm sorry as hell. I'll have to turn you in. That's the way it is, Doc."

Softly he closed the door, and in the next room, he said to the startled nurse. "Sometimes there ain't no justice. Get me the police."

As the bewildered nurse reached for the telephone, the crack of a pistol shot came from the doctor's office. The nurse uttered a little scream.

"Take it easy," said Big Bill softly. "For a guy like him, it's better than life in the pen. That's the best he could have gotten."

He shook his head wearily. This was one time when it didn't feel good to collect a debt.

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I had almost forgotten, when they came and reopened all the old wounds—the woman who swam naked before my unseeing eyes, and the man who had already killed once . . .

THE INTRUDERS

by Evan Hunter

I KNEW THE TRAIL LIKE THE BACK of my hand, and I followed it up to the cabin, walking past the sound of the brook spilling over the large rocks where I knew there was a stand of birches.

A crow shrieked shrilly somewhere up over my head, and I lifted my eyes and felt the sun strong on my upturned face. The air was almost antiseptic, laden with the aroma of crushed pine needles, mild with the end of summer.

I stayed on the trail, sure of it, but walking slowly because I was in no particular hurry. I was barefoot, and the earth was rich under my skin. It smelled of growing things, and it was warm with the last slanted rays of the dying sun. I entered the clearing before the cabin, and then made a beeline for the door. I felt the rutted path under my feet, felt the sprinkling of gravel just outside the door. I lifted my foot and put it down on the splintered wood of the door sill, and then I stepped into the cool dimness of the cabin and started across the room.

My toe hit a chair leg, and before I could pull back, my shin hit the chair. I cried out in surprise and bent down and began rubbing my shin. My hands found the chair and I shoved it aside. It was far out from the table where it should have been. How . . .

Something hard pressed against my backbone. It stayed there with an insistent pressure, tight against my spine, trembling a little.

"Get up," a voice behind me said. The voice was harsh and grating, a young voice, a man's voice.

I stood up slowly, resenting the sudden intrusion.

"Raise your hands over your head," the voice said. There was a weapon behind that command. I felt it in the tone of the voice, and I knew now what the pressure on my spine was. I lifted my arms to the roof. The man was

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close behind me. I could smell the aroma of tobacco on his breath, sharp over the clean-lived-in smell of the cabin. There was coffee going on the stove.

"You live here?"

I didn't answer.

The gun jabbed harder into my back, and the voice got impatient. "I asked you something. You live here?"

I strained my ears, and my nostrils widened. There was a faint sound somewhere else in the room, a sound like the soft rustle of silk.

There was the jab at my backbone again, harder this time, vicious. "Do you live here, you lousy. . . ."

"Leave him alone," the other voice said. "He's blind, can't you see?"

The other voice was soft. It came from the throat with a sort of whisper behind it. I pictured a blond girl in a calico dress with her hair pulled into a pony tail. Her face was burned from the sun, and her legs were bare and long. Her eyes were blue against the tan of her face. That's what I pictured.

The man moved around in front of me, and I felt him staring at me. "Yeah," he said. "He's blind." I heard him swallow, and then he added, "We're lucky, Dot."

"We're real lucky," I said. My voice must have held some bitterness I felt.

"The sensitive type, huh? Just keep your nose clean. We'll try to treat you gentle." He chuckled suddenly, a short, abortive laugh that died almost before it found voice. I heard the girl catch her breath sharply, and then the man said, "What's your name, mister?"

"What's yours?"

"Don't get smart. This is a .45 in my hand." He paused. "You familiar with guns?"

"I ought to be," I said.

"Army, huh?" There was another pause, and I felt his eyes probing my face, looking for the marks of a wound around my eyes. He wouldn't find any because the medics had been very good. They'd left my face unmarked. They'd only taken my eyes. "I know how to use it," he said simply.

"Sam. . . ." the girl started.

"Shut up, Dot!" From the sound of his voice, I knew he'd turned his head away from me. I wondered if I should jump him, and then I decided against that. There was a better way. There was a rifle. . . .

His voice came in my direction again. "What's your name?"

"Jeff Toland," I said.

"We'll be staying a while, Toland. You better get used to us. When we go, you forget all about us. You can't see us, so the forgetting should be easy."

"What are you running from?"

"I ask the questions," he re-

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minded me. "You live here alone?"

"Yes."

"How long you been living here?"

"And what difference does it make?"

"I want to know. How long?"

"Little more than a month."

"You married?"

"No."

"You got a family?"

"I don't see what. . . ."

"Answer me!"

"Yes, I've got a family. A father and brother."

"Do they know you're here?"

"Yes."

He paused for just an instant. "You left your family and came here, huh? To live alone?"

"Yes," I said. "What of it?"

A smile crept into his voice. "What are *you* running from?" he asked.

"Listen," I started, "don't give me. . . ."

"Coffee's ready," the girl said quickly. "Come on, Sam."

"Sure," the man said. "You want coffee, Toland?"

I didn't want coffee. There was a Remington Gamemaster-141 in the closet at the far end of the cabin. That's what I wanted. I'd practiced with it a few times, taking pot shots at sounds, and even managing to hit a rabbit once. I wanted my hands on that rifle, but there was no sense fighting him until then. I could use a cup," I said.

I started for the table, and I took three steps and then tripped and fell flat on my face. "Who the hell . . .?"

"Get that valise!" Sam shouted. I heard the click of high-heeled shoes on the wooden floor, and then the scrape of a heavy bag. I got to my knees and then moved uncertainly to my feet. Sam's voice sounded close to my ear.

"Sorry about the bag," he said. "You all right?" His voice surprised me for an instant. It was not the same voice he'd used before. There was honest compassion now, and concern.

"I've . . . I've got things arranged," I said, a little shakily.

"So you can get around, huh?" He was interested now, and there was a subtle change in his voice.

I heard the change, hesitated, and then said, "Yes."

"Very clever." The voice was the old one again, and the suddenness of the change startled me. It was as if he had momentarily established a bond with me, caught himself at it, and then severed the tie immediately. "We'll move things around a little. Sort of put a chair here," I heard the scrape of the chair, ". . . and another chair here." He grunted and I listened to the scrape of the chair's legs against the wooden floor.

"There's no need—"

"The table over this way," he said, breathing heavily as he

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shoved the table. His voice receded across the cabin, and I heard him shoving the cots around.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I said coldly.

"Yeah, it's a real picnic," he said.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" I said. "Why don't you just go?"

"A week, two weeks," Sam said. "We'll leave after that." His voice turned away from me. "Pour the coffee, Dot. I'll lead Toland to the table." He came closer to me, and his hand clasped my elbow, and it was surprisingly gentle. "Come on," he said, and his voice was that other voice again, an unsure, unsteady voice.

"Get away from me!" I shouted. "I'll find my own way!"

I jerked away from him, and there was a moment's silence. His laugh came then, a curious, almost defensive laugh that made me angrier. I lurched across the cabin recklessly, colliding with a chair and shoving it out of my way, I stuck my hands out ahead of me, flailing the air, groping wildly.

"The coffee!" the girl screamed. "Watch out!"

My hands hit the pot, and I heard the clang of my ring against the metal. And then I heard the louder clang of the pot hitting the table top, the cover rolling loose, the liquid splashing out. A wave of heat engulfed my hand, scalded me to the wrist. I opened my mouth and I would have screamed if I hadn't remembered Sam and his laugh. I let my teeth bang together hard, with the pain searing my hand. Suddenly the perfume was closer, and there was a cool touch on my elbow.

"Let me see it," Dot said.

"Get away from me!"

She took my hand firmly, and I tried to pull away, but the pain was a throbbing thing and she held me tightly.

"Where do you keep your cooking fat?"

"The cupboard," I said. She dropped my hand, and I heard the click of her heels again, the tiny snap of the door when she pulled it open. She moved some cans around, and then started back to me. She took my hand and began salving it with the fat.

"I'll be careful," she said.

"I don't need anyone's help," I told her.

When her voice came, I knew she was facing Sam, and that made me wonder a little. "No one needs help," she said. "That's the trouble." She sighed heavily and kept rubbing the soft fat onto my burned hand.

"Is it bad?" Sam asked. He sounded worried.

"It'll heal," she said. "Get some bandages, will you, Sam?"

Sam grunted, and I heard him rummage around in the drawers until he found a roll of gauze. He

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brought it to her, and she wrapped the hand gently, her head close to mine as she worked. When she finished, she stepped back a pace and said, "How's that? Looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

When I didn't answer, she let out a small gasp and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Stop being sorry all over the place," Sam said harshly. "I still want coffee. You better make another pot."

I tossed the night, thinking of the Remington in the closet. I could hear Sam's restless turning, and I knew he wasn't asleep, and I wondered what ghosts were rushing across his mind. I hated him.

He had brought the seeing world back into my life, and he'd reminded me again how completely worthless I actually was. He had rearranged the furniture, a simple thing in itself, and by doing that he had also rearranged the ordered pattern of my life. He'd forced me to recall the chasm between myself and people who could see. He had, in effect, shouted, "You're blind!" and he had reopened all the old wounds I'd carefully covered when I came up to the cabin.

I'd had enough. I'd had enough of Tom treating me like a simpleton, and Dad following me around the house to make sure I didn't trip and kill myself. I'd had enough of the strained silence, the awkward fumbling. Every day, every goddamned day, they reminded me I was blind. Everything they said or did told me I was no longer a part of their world, a misfit, a parasite. They didn't understand. They didn't understand that I'd been able to see for twenty-three years of my life.

They didn't know that I'd sit alone and try to remember what it had been like. What was the red of a sunset? How did smoke rise from a smoldering cigarette? Or steam drift from a coffee cup? Did the stars wink?

When I'd told them I was going up to the cabin, they were distressed. Tom mildly disapproved in his big-brother voice, and I could sense his shaking his head sadly. Dad sighed heavily, overwhelmed with the horror of having a son who was blind. But they agreed in the long run, and I sensed a vast relief settling over them. I was voluntarily taking myself out of their lives. They wouldn't have to make any more excuses, and they wouldn't have to watch their talk and their manners, or care for me like a Mongolian idiot that had been washed ashore. They'd dropped me off at the cabin, and they'd wished me well, and I'd settled down to the business of making my own world.

I had liked the world I made.

It was a world of quiet darkness, with no people in it.

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Until Sam. He'd brought it all back, and I thought of this now, and I worried the pillow, and I wanted that rifle with every fibre in my body. He'd shoved his way into the darkness rudely, and I wanted to shove him out again.

I was still awake when the first tentative fingers of the sun probed through the open window and touched my face. I kicked back the covers and swung my legs over the side of the cot, reaching for my shirt on the end post. I found the shirt, felt for the label and buttons to be sure it wasn't inside-out, and then slipped into it. Buttoning was usually a quick job for me, one of the few things that hadn't required relearning. Most men never look at their shirts while buttoning them. The bandaged hand made it difficult this morning. The hand was still raw, still painful, and I fumbled with one hand, cursing the shirt, and cursing the coffee pot, and ultimately cursing Sam and my dead eyes.

I finally got it buttoned, and I pulled on my trousers and stood up, remembering that everything in the room had been rearranged, and wondering how I'd ever find my way to the door.

"You up, Toland?" Sam called.

"Yes."

"Stay where you are until I get dressed. Dot!"

"Hmmm?" Her voice came sleepily.

"Wake up, Dot. The sun's shining."

I heard Sam stomping around, and then Dot's covers were shoved back. I heard the rustle of silk when she stood up, the creak of the spring. She dressed silently, and I wondered for the first time if she and Sam were married.

"Where does a guy wash?" he asked.

"The brook," I told him. "Outside."

"That trickle?"

"It goes down to the river about a half-mile south. I usually bathe in the river, but you can wash in the brook."

"Let's go," Sam said. He took my hand, and I pulled away roughly. I followed him to the door of the cabin, and then outside onto the gravel. I moved ahead of him then and started for the brook.

"Smells good," he said softly. I didn't answer him. He was walking behind me, and I heard the crunch of his shoes against the twigs and small rocks. I walked directly to the brook, leaned down and rinsed off my face. Sam stood near me, and I wondered if the .45 was in his fist. I was thinking of only one thing—the rifle back at the cabin. I got up, shook the water from my hands, and headed back.

Sam called, "Be careful, Toland."

I nodded, walked twelve steps toward the sun, swerved to the

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right so I'd miss the big oak stump in the clearing, and then followed the rutted path to the gravel outside the door. I knew Dot was standing there even before she spoke.

"Here," she said.

"What is it?"

"A towel."

I reached out. "Thanks."

"I don't like to pat and dab when I wash," she said.

"Nobody invited you," I told her.

"How far is the river?"

"About half a mile south."

"Maybe I'll try it."

"Fine." I was thinking of the rifle, and I wanted her to go. I wanted that gun before Sam came back from the brook, and she was wasting my time. I heard her start down the path, smelled the faint fragrance of her perfume as she walked by. It was a simple scent, and I pictured the blond in calico again, and then I forced the picture out of my mind. I listened to her footsteps fading, and then I stepped into the cabin, standing on the doorsill and cursing the rearranged furniture. The closet was at the other end of the cabin, and I'd have to hurry if I wanted that gun before Sam returned.

I took four steps and collided with a chair, catching it before it toppled to the floor. I got an idea, and I put the chair ahead of me, sliding it across the floor. The chair hit the table, and I reached over the back, felt my way around the table, and then moved the chair again, still sliding it across the floor. It hit something else, close to the floor. The valise. I kicked the valise aside, kept moving the chair until it hit the far wall, and then groped along the wall until I found the closet. I could hear Sam shout something to Dot.

I opened the closet door and reached inside.

There was a musty smell in the closet and the smell told me I would have that rifle soon, and then I'd force Sam to leave. I dropped to my knees and began feeling along the floor. My hands touched the leathery outline of my boots, and I threw those aside and probed deeper into the closet. I moved a fishing rod, and an old kerosene lantern, and then felt for the Remington.

There was an empty corner. I moved my hands to the left, feeling along the closet wall. I kept moving my hands until they met the back wall of the closet, and then I worked forward toward the door, my hands caressing every inch of the floor. I was sweating, and I felt panic rising within me.

The other side, maybe. Maybe I'd left the rifle in the other corner. I turned and started feeling the other side of the closet. Maybe. . . .

"You looking for something, Toland?"

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Sam's voice. I pulled my hands back quickly. "My . . . my boots," I said. "I. . . " I stood up, my back to the open closet He came into the cabin, his tread sounding across the floor. He stood beside me, and I smelled the perspiration on him.

"Your boots, huh?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, my—"

"Not the rifle, huh?"

I heard what he said, and it struck deep within me. I stood there with my hands hanging at my sides, and the room was very silent for a few minutes.

"I've got the rifle, Toland. I went through the place with a fine comb when I first got here. I've got the rifle."

I didn't say anything. The roof had fallen in, and I stood there blinking stupidly, feeling the darkness and nothing else. I could hear Sam breathing beside me, and I felt his eyes on me and wondered what his face was saying. And then his voice came gentle again.

"Look, Toland, why don't you just relax? We won't be here long." He paused, caught his breath, and added, "We won't hurt you."

"I don't want pity," I said tightly.

"It's not that, Toland. I mean, what the hell. You're blind—"

"Shut up!" I said.

"Well, look. . . ."

"Shut up!" I lunged forward, throwing my fist at where I thought his mouth was. He sidestepped, and I felt his hands against my back and he shoved me across the cabin. I stumbled forward, crashing against the furniture, wheeling and staggering until I hit the wall near the door.

I rested against the wall, hearing my breath tremble between my lips.

"You better go outside and cool off," Sam said.

"You. . . ."

"Go ahead, Toland. Take a walk."

I groped for the door, found my way outside, and began walking from the cabin. There was hate inside me, and it was mixed with a despondent feeling of emptiness. Blind. *Blind!* How can you hit a man when you can't see him? How, how?

I clenched my fists, and I began running, away from the cabin, away from Sam and humanity. The sun was high now, and it warmed my head and shoulders. I listened to the forest sounds, and I followed the brook, staying close to the path I knew. I ran, and then I heard the strong rush of water over rocks, and I knew I'd reached the river. I started down toward the water, picking my way carefully. I guess I made some noise on the path.

Her voice rang out, very loud,

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alarmed. "Don't come near me!"

I stopped and shouted. "It's me. Toland."

"Oh." I could feel her weighing the fact that I was a blind man. The knowledge that she was doing this was painful. I stood there and waited, and I felt curiously alone when she said, "All right."

I walked down to the water's edge, guiding myself by the slope of the land. The rage in me had subsided. There was only the deep sadness now, the loneliness. I heard her splashing in the water, and I sat on the low, flat rock near the water's edge, listening, wondering what she looked like.

"Is your hair blond?" I asked, surprised the question had found voice.

"No."

"Oh."

"You sound disappointed."

"I thought it was blond."

"It's black."

"You better watch the current," I said. "There's a falls about a quarter of a mile down."

"I can swim," she said. She splashed some more, and it sounded as if she'd gone a little farther from shore. "This is wonderful," she said. "I feel so clean."

"How'd you tie up with Sam?" I asked abruptly.

She stopped splashing for a moment, and then said, "Tie up? That's a curious way to put it."

"You know what I mean." I replied.

"Yes," she said. "He's in trouble. When someone you love is in trouble, you try to help."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"Trouble."

"Did he kill someone?"

"What's the difference?" Her voice sounded a little farther out now.

"He did, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you're helping him? A *murderer?*"

"He's not a murderer!" she shouted. "Don't say that!"

"He killed a man," I said bluntly. "That makes him a—"

"He killed a man," she said, "and maybe the man deserved it, and maybe he didn't. But that doesn't make Sam a murderer."

"You've got a funny way of thinking. You adjust the rules to fit."

"Maybe I do. But Sam's not a murderer."

"You'd better come back," I said. "The current—"

"Don't worry about *me.*" Her voice was angry.

"What else has Sam done?" I asked. I wanted to hurt her now.

"Nothing. Nothing else."

"No? What about the .45? Where'd he get that?"

"Sam was in the Army, too. The last war."

"Oh."

"Forgive me," she said curtly. "I keep forgetting that's your sore spot."

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"It's not my sore spot."

"Then why do you get so mad—"

"I don't get mad! For God's sake, can't anyone leave me alone?" I scrambled to my feet and started up the slope.

"Hey!" she called.

I ignored her. I wasn't going to listen to the same old apologies.

"Hey! Hey, Toland!"

There was alarm in her voice, alarm bordering on panic. I turned and ran down to the bank again, listening for her voice and the sound of her splashing.

"Toland . . . the current . . . I. . . ."

I stood on the edge of the bank listening, wondering. My hands were shaking, and I was acutely aware of the fact that I had no eyes, and the knowledge made me sick. I thought of the falls downriver, and a heavy sweat broke out on my brow.

"Toland. . . ."

"I can't see!" I shouted.

"Toland, please. . . ."

I stood there and listened to the urgency in her voice. I heard the rush of the water, and I knew there were rocks below. And then I jumped. I jumped, and I miraculously missed the rocks and I felt the water closing over my head, blocking the warmth of the sun. I surfaced, gulped a breath of air, and yelled, "Where are you? Keep talking!"

"This way, Toland. Oh, my God, this way, and hurry!"

I found her voice, and I started swimming toward it, and she kept talking, carried by the strong current now. I felt the current grab me, and I helped it, swimming in a powerful crawl, heading for her voice.

"This way. Over more. Hurry . . . please!"

I swam swiftly, guided by her voice, and suddenly she was very close, and her arms came up around my neck. She smelled of soap, and her body was slippery, and I remembered abruptly that she'd been bathing when I came down to the river.

"Which way is the shore?"

She trembled in my arms, and I treaded water, kicking out against the current. "That way. On your right."

"Don't fight me. Get on your back."

She swung over onto her back, and I cupped her chin with my bandaged hand. The water had loosened the gauze, and the bandage trailed behind my hand, tugged by the current. I lashed out with my free hand, the good one, kicked hard, moving against the current, heading for shore.

"More to your right," she said. I kept swimming, concentrating only on the tricky current and the shoreline. When my toes hit sand, I was surprised. I stood up and held her while she got footing.

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I was out of breath when I staggered up onto the bank. I dropped down and felt the strong sun begin drying my shirt and trousers. She dropped down beside me. She was breathing hard, and I listened to the air rushing in and out of her mouth. Finally, her breathing was even again, and there was only the sound of the river rushing against the rocks.

"Thanks, Toland," she said.

I was starting to tell her it was all right, just opening my mouth, when the shadow fell over my face, blotting the warmth of the sun. Her lips came down on mine, gently, very gently, so softly that I was unsure of the touch at first. I pulled my brows together, and then her mouth was gone, as swiftly as it had been there.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"Just like that," she said. Her voice was very low.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"About Sam? Stay with him. I have to, you see."

"Why?"

She didn't answer for a moment, and I knew she was thinking. When her voice did come, it was halting and uncertain. "He can go either way, Toland. He . . . he can become a killer, a real killer. He can break with society completely, go the way of the beast, alone, in the darkness of the hunted man. I don't want that for him."

"What do you want?"

"The other way. I want him to go back, give himself up. I've been trying to get him to do that. I'd take him forcibly if I could. You see, he killed a man, Toland, but it was in a fight, and the other man had a knife. It . . . it could just as well have been Sam. Have . . . you ever known the jungle of the city, Toland? Have you ever known what it does to people?"

"No," I said honestly.

"It's not good," she said. "And he's killed a man. But I don't think society will want his life for it. I don't think so."

"You're trying to excuse murder," I said.

"No. He should pay. But maybe there'll be another chance for him. If he goes on now, he'll be no better than an animal. I can't let that happen."

"He'll never give himself up. Once a man kills. . . ."

"It's not an easy thing to break with humanity, Toland. Even when you've killed."

I felt my lip curling. "It's the easiest thing in the world," I said.

"Toland, do me a favor, will you?"

"What?"

"Please don't provoke him. He's all wound up, tight inside. He's been running for days now. I don't want him to snap. I don't want him to kill again. It'll be habit after the next time,

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and then it'll be too late."

"I'm blind," I said. "The blind can't provoke too well."

We lay with the sun strong on us, and I kept thinking of her as a blond, and I had to correct the picture each time. We were there about ten minutes when Sam's voice sounded behind us.

"Well, now, ain't this cozy?"

I felt Dot move suddenly beside me. "He saved my life," she started.

"I don't give a damn what he did!" Sam shouted. "I don't like the idea of you parading without a stitch . . ."

"He's *blind!*" Dot said desperately.

"What difference does that make? He's a man, isn't he? You're still my sister, damn it, and I don't like the idea. Get the hell back to the cabin."

She got to her feet, and I heard her feeling around for her clothes, and I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to laugh. I wanted to laugh because Dot was Sam's sister, and not his wife or his mistress or whatever I'd thought she was. And I wanted to laugh because Sam had called me a man, even though I had no eyes.

And most of all, I wanted to laugh because of Sam's distorted sense of morals. He'd committed the highest moral sin. He'd killed a man, broken the highest law of humanity, the tightest moral code. And yet he was getting all excited because his sister had bathed near a man who couldn't see. The paradox was ridiculous. I couldn't keep the laugh in any longer.

It bubbled up out of my throat, erupted from my mouth. I tried to clamp my jaws shut, but I couldn't, and the laughter kept coming, and I heard Dot wheel in surprise.

"What's so funny, Toland?" Sam bellowed.

I tried to answer, but the laugh wouldn't let me. It kept shaking my belly, spilling from my mouth. It set the woods to ringing, and I almost didn't hear Sam take a step closer to me.

I felt the slap, though.

It was hard and flat, and it hit me on my right cheek and sent my head swerving to the side. The laugh stopped abruptly, and a cold anger started in the pit of my stomach.

It wasn't that I minded being hit. It was the way I'd been hit. A slap. Reserved for children, or women. A slap.

I shoved myself to my feet and leaped forward, my hands reaching for where I thought Sam's throat was. My fingers found skin, and I closed my hands. Sam's hands came up and tightened on my wrists, and we staggered backward in a clumsy, fierce embrace. Dot screamed, and I tightened my fingers and felt Sam's throat muscles bulge against my hands.

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He broke my grip on his throat, and I brought back my right hand and threw it at him, falling forward. It caught his face, and he yelled, "You dirty bastard!" and I kept falling forward, hitting the ground. I heard the scrape of his shoes as he backed away, and then I heard a small click, and I knew he had the .45 in his hand again, with the safety off.

"You asked for this," he said. His voice was harsh, and he was breathing heavily. I felt the rock-strewn ground beneath me, and I listened to his voice. "You asked for this, Toland."

I waited for the slug, and the woods were suddenly very quiet, and then Dot's voice came in a strident scream. "Sam! No!"

"Keep out of this, Dot!" he yelled.

I waited in the darkness, my hands flat against the ground and the rocks.

"Don't, Sam. Please." Her voice was curiously soft.

"He jumped me," Sam said. "The dirty bastard jumped me." I heard the tremble in his voice, and I knew Sam was fighting a battle, and that his finger was ready to tighten around that trigger.

"Don't," she said again. "Please don't. Leave it the way it is. Not again, Sam. Please."

"He jumped me," Sam repeated. There was something of primitive justice in his simple statement. Someone had jumped him, threatened him. I remembered suddenly that Sam had killed before, and the knowledge chilled me as I waited for his bullet. And then my hands closed on the rocks beneath me. My fingers trembled. I clutched a big rock tightly.

Something terrible must have crossed Sam's face. I heard Dot scream, "SAM!"

I reared back, then snapped my arm forward, aiming where he should have been. The rock left my hand, and I waited for the sound of the gun, and when it didn't come, I was surprised. I heard the rock smash against flesh with a dull thud, and then I heard Sam crumple to the ground. I got to my feet, and stumbled forward, groping for the .45. I found it, and I lifted it high.

"Where are you?"

"Here," Dot said softly. "You don't need the gun."

"Is he . . . is he . . .?"

"He's unconscious," she said dully.

"Take him," I said. "Take him and get out of here."

She didn't answer. I listened for her breathing, and then said, "Dot?"

"I'm here."

"Take him. Take him down to your car, wherever you've got it. Leave me alone. Go away."

"I'll take him," she said. Her voice was strange, as if she'd waited for this moment for a very

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long time, and now that it had come, she didn't know what to do with it. I heard her kneel down, struggling with Sam's body.

"I . . . I can't lift him."

"I'll help," I said. "Where's the car?"

"Down the path. I'll show you."

I hefted Sam onto my shoulder, and then waited for her to lead me. We started off down the path together, silently. When we reached the car, she opened the door, and I threw Sam inside. He'd be out for a long time, long enough for Dot to get him to the police.

I heard her open the front door, and then she said, "I'll go now."

"Go ahead."

"And you?"

"What about me? I'll get along. I got along fine until now."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Get in the car."

I heard the slight protest of the car's springs as she stepped inside, and then I heard the window rolling down.

"Jeff. . . ."

"Get going," I said. "Take him back to society."

"I will," she said. "I'll let them decide."

"They'll decide, all right. They'll send him straight to the chair. But that's what you want, so get out of here. Leave me alone."

"I don't think they will, Jeff. I wouldn't turn him in if I thought so."

"You've got a lot of faith in humanity," I said bitterly. "Stupid, blind. . . ." I cut myself short.

"Blind faith," she said. "Jeff, come with me. This isn't good."

"It's good for me. I don't want anyone. I don't want help, and I don't want pity. For God's sake, why don't you go?"

She twisted the key, and I heard the starter.

"Jeff, give them a chance. Give them a chance to let you help yourself. Just give them—"

"No!" I shouted. "How can they know? How can any of them know? Are any of them blind? Are they? How can I expect anything from them?"

"None of them have ever killed, either," she said. "But I'll bring my brother to them. I'll let them decide." She paused. "Why don't you let them decide, too, Jeff?"

"Go," I said. "Please go."

"I'll be back," she said. "I'll come back for you, Jeff."

I shook my head, and I heard the sound of the engine as she started the car and slapped it into gear. The car sped off down the road, and I smelled the raised dust, and the gasoline fumes, and the heavy, sluggish odor of oil—but I did not see the car leave.

I walked back to the cabin, and I thought about what she'd said, and I wondered if she would come back, and I wondered if I wanted her to come back.

It was very dark, very quiet. But it was also very lonely.

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